

University of California San Francisco

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Vascular Dementia

Vascular dementia is a condition that causes changes in thinking skills. Vascular dementia can cause problems with memory, speech or balance. These changes can happen suddenly or begin mildly and get worse over time.

What Causes Vascular Dementia (VaD)?

Vascular dementia is caused by conditions that damage blood vessels, reducing or blocking blood flow to the brain. A stroke may block an artery and cause many different symptoms that may include memory, thinking, or movement changes. Other conditions, like diabetes or high blood pressure, can damage blood vessels and eventually lead to problems with memory or thinking skills.

The term *vascular dementia* (VaD) is usually reserved for a subtly progressive worsening of memory and other cognitive functions that are presumed to be due to vascular disease within the brain. VaD patients often present with similar symptoms to [Alzheimer's disease](#) (AD) patients, however, the related changes in the brain are not due to AD pathology but to chronically reduced blood flow in the brain, eventually resulting in dementia. Clinically, such patients can look very similar to patients with AD, and when this occurs the two diseases are very difficult to distinguish from each other. However, some clinical symptoms and brain imaging findings suggest that vascular disease is playing a role in, if not completely explaining, a patient's cognitive impairment.

What Are the Risk Factors for Vascular Dementia?

- Age
- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes

- Little or no physical exercise
- Unhealthy diet
- Obesity
- Hardening of the arteries anywhere in the body

How is Age Related to Vascular Dementia?

Most people with vascular dementia start having symptoms after age 65, although the risk is significantly higher for people in their 80s and 90s.

What Happens in Vascular Dementia?

Vascular dementia can cause different symptoms depending on where the blood vessels are damaged in the brain. For example, a person who had a stroke may have sudden problems with memory, balance, or speech. However, a person can have several strokes that may be unnoticeably small, but the damage can add up over time.

Many people with vascular dementia have trouble with memory. Others may have difficulty with organization and solving complex problems, slowed thinking, or being easily distracted. People with vascular dementia may also have changes in mood or behavior, such as irritability, loss of interest, or depression.

Sometimes, people with vascular dementia have trouble with balance and movement. This might include weakness on one side of the body, and the symptoms may get worse over time.

Are There Medicines to Treat Vascular Dementia?

Though there is no cure for vascular dementia yet, [there are medications that can help manage the symptoms](#). Sometimes medications used to treat memory problems in [Alzheimer's disease](#) may be helpful for vascular dementia. Sometimes, people with vascular dementia can have mood changes, such as depression or irritability. These can be managed by medications like the ones used for depression or anxiety.

What Other Things Help?

In addition to medications, there are various ways to help a person with vascular dementia. Research has shown that [physical exercise](#) and maintaining a healthy weight help to enhance brain health and reduce the risk of heart problems, stroke and other diseases that affect blood vessels. A [balanced diet](#), enough [sleep](#) and limited alcohol intake are other important ways to promote good brain health and reduce the risk for heart disease. Other illnesses that affect the brain, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, should also be treated if present.

Resources

- [A Patient's Guide to Vascular Dementia](#) (PDF)
- [What is Vascular Dementia?](#) (US News & World Report)
- [American Stroke Association](#)
- [American Heart Association](#)
- [Alzheimer's Association](#)
- [National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke](#) (NINDS)
- [Heart Health and Aging](#)
- [Blood Pressure](#)
- [Diabetes](#)
- [Eating Well](#)
- [Exercise](#)
- [Smoking Cessation](#)
- [Family Caregiver Alliance](#)
- [National Institutes of Health](#)

Resources for Providers

- [A Healthcare Provider's Guide to Vascular Dementia](#) (PDF)
- [Vascular Contributions to Cognitive Impairment and Dementia](#)
- [Dementia Resources for Health Professionals](#)

Participate in Research

- [Clinical trials at UCSF](#)
- [ClinicalTrials.gov](#)

What is Dementia?

Alzheimer's Disease

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy

Corticobasal Syndrome

Frontotemporal Dementia

HIV-Related Cognitive Impairment

Huntington's Disease

Mild Cognitive Impairment

Parkinson's Dementias

Posterior Cortical Atrophy

Primary Progressive Aphasia

Progressive Supranuclear Palsy

Rapidly Progressive Dementias

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