

Normal Aging vs Dementia

Dementia [8] is not normal aging. It is characterized by multiple cognitive deficits with memory impairments as a frequent early symptom.

These cognitive deficits include:

- **Executive functioning** [9]
- **Language** [10]
- **Working (immediate) memory** [11]
- Spatial memory
- Verbal memory

Generally, there must be an impairment in social functioning and independent living for a diagnosis of dementia to be given. Independent living describes the ability to shop alone, manage finances, perform basic household duties and monitor appropriate social behaviors. Often it is difficult to determine exactly when a person should be concerned with cognitive changes they may be experiencing. Symptoms vary from person to person, what is normal for someone, may not be normal for someone else. This contributes to the challenges clinicians may face when determining whether or not cognitive decline is due to a physiological or psychological (excessive worry, depression, anxiety, etc.) condition.

Symptoms to watch for:

- Getting lost in familiar places
- Repetitive questioning
- Odd or inappropriate behaviors
- Forgetfulness of recent events
- Repeated falls or loss of balance
- Personality changes
- Decline in planning and organization
- Changes in diet/eating habits
- Changes in hygiene
- Increased apathy
- Changes in language abilities, including comprehension

The progression of cognitive deficits observed in conditions such as Alzheimer's disease may be accelerated in the few years immediately preceding the diagnosis. Accelerated cognitive decline may not occur until events, like a stroke, reach a threshold where the brain can no longer compensate for damage. Thus, it is important to receive regular medical check ups in order to

monitor the extent and severity to which someone may be experiencing cognitive decline. Independent living should not be compromised during normal aging, unlike the transition to a neurodegenerative condition.

Risk factors for cognitive decline

- High blood pressure, diabetes, poor nutrition and social isolation are associated with a higher probability of developing a neurodegenerative condition
- Heart disease
- Family history of dementia
- Psychological factors such as stress and depression also negatively affect the healthy aging process

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Source URL: <http://memory.ucsf.edu/brain/aging/dementia>

Links:

[8] <http://memory.ucsf.edu/education>

[9] <http://memory.ucsf.edu/brain/executive>

[10] <http://memory.ucsf.edu/brain/language>

[11] <http://memory.ucsf.edu/brain/memory/working>