

# **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA:** An Indigenous Guide



## Some Facts:

Rates of dementia in Indigenous people are higher than they are in non-Indigenous people in Canada. Research suggests that the number will continue to rise and by 2031 there may be a 4.6 times increase in the number of on-reserve First Nations people living with dementia.

Symptoms of dementia may begin in people as young as 45-50 or may begin much later depending on the type of dementia. Recent studies suggest that dementia may occur as much as 10 years earlier in Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people in Canada.

Research with Indigenous people in Canada suggests that age-related dementias are not being diagnosed early enough for loved ones and families to benefit from local care and supports.

Some Indigenous people may be reluctant to discuss forgetfulness or memory loss with health care providers for many reasons, for example:

- They consider it to be a normal part of aging and not problematic
- They have not had good experiences with health care providers in the past
- They do not think a diagnosis would make any difference
- They are embarrassed and do not want others to know about their symptoms
- They do not want to take the memory tests
- They have difficulty accessing health care services

## When is forgetfulness a part of normal aging versus a symptom of illness?

Forgetting can be a normal part of getting older. We may forget to pay a bill, lose things and find it hard to remember the words we want to use every once and a while. It can be normal for our memories of events to be less detailed than they once were, we may take a little bit longer to remember. Sometimes we may have words on the tips of our tongues that we cannot find in the moment.

When these types of forgetting become worse over time or begin to happen more often, it may be a sign that something is wrong. For example, missing one bill payment once in a while may be normal, but missing many payments and not being able to manage money may not be normal. Losing track of the day may be normal, but losing track of the month or season is not. Difficulty finding the words we want may sometimes be normal, but not being able to carry on a conversation is not.



# Warning Signs and Symptoms of Dementia

You are encouraged to speak with your health care provider about memory loss when you become worried that it is impacting your day-to-day life. Having a few of these symptoms more than once in a while may be a sign of memory loss caused by dementia or another illness.

The following are some examples of the signs and symptoms described by Indigenous people with dementia and their families. When these signs and symptoms are experienced more than once in a while they may indicate the early stages of age-related dementia.

## Forgetfulness and memory loss that affects day-to-day living

- Misplacing things like your keys, purse or wallet
- Having a hard time remembering the names of people who you know, especially family members
- Forgetting to turn off the stove, leaving the fridge door open, forgetting to turn off the water
- Repeating yourself; telling the same story over many times in the same day
- Needing lots of reminders, missing appointments
- Walking into a room and forgetting why you went there
- Forgetting if you took your pills or forgetting to get cleaned up in the morning
- Forgetting things that happened through the day but remembering things from way back

## Difficulty performing familiar tasks

- Trouble driving a car or cooking
- Forgetting how to sew, quilt, knit, crochet, or do crafts
- Having trouble with daily routines such as getting cleaned up in the morning and getting dressed

## Problems with language

- Forgetting words
- Having trouble finding the words you want to use
- Stopping part way through a sentence because you cannot remember the rest of what you wanted to say

## Disorientation in time and space

- Forgetting the month or season
- Forgetting when you last had something to eat
- Getting lost either on foot or while driving or not remembering where you are going
- Confusing morning with evening

## Impaired judgement

- Leaving the house without a coat when it is cold outside
- Wearing unusual clothing
- Making questionable purchases

## Changes in mood, behaviour, and personality

- Feeling frustrated and sometimes angry
- Hiding things
- Emotional outbursts
- Losing interest in things you once enjoyed
- Not participating in social events
- Hearing or seeing things that other people cannot

## Why should we seek care for forgetfulness or memory loss?

Forgetfulness caused by dementia progresses from mild to moderate to severe over time. Seeking help for memory loss early is important. If you are worried you should speak to a health care worker or your doctor. An accurate diagnosis can determine if the forgetfulness is related to dementia, what type of dementia it could be, or other illnesses. For example, medication errors, drug interactions and complications arising from other infections or diseases can also cause forgetfulness and confusion. If memory loss is found to be caused by a dementia illness, an early diagnosis will help to make sure you and your family are receiving the most appropriate treatment, information and supports.

## For more information...

Indigenous Inuit Home and Community Care

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

Alzheimer's Society of Canada

[www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)

Indigenous Cognition & Aging Awareness Research Exchange (I-CAARE)

[www.i-caare.ca](http://www.i-caare.ca)

Government of Canada

[www.seniors.gc.ca](http://www.seniors.gc.ca)

End-of-Life Care in Indigenous Communities

<http://eolfn.lakeheadu.ca/>

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