

Vascular Dementia / Multi Infarct Dementia

Vascular dementia is a common type of dementia caused by reduced blood flow to the brain. It's estimated to affect around 150,000 people in the UK. Dementia is the name for problems with mental abilities caused by gradual changes and damage in the brain. It's rare in people under 65. Vascular dementia tends to get worse over time, although it's sometimes possible to slow it down.

Causes of vascular dementia

Vascular dementia is caused by reduced blood flow to the brain, which damages and eventually kills the brain cells. This can develop as a result of:

- narrowing and blockage of the small blood vessels inside the brain
- a single stroke (where the blood supply to part of the brain is suddenly cut off)
- lots of "mini strokes" that cause tiny but widespread damage to the brain

In many cases, these problems are linked to underlying conditions – such as high blood pressure and diabetes – and lifestyle factors such as smoking and being overweight. Tackling these might reduce your risk of vascular dementia in later life, although it's not yet clear exactly how much your risk of dementia can be reduced.

Symptoms of vascular dementia

Vascular dementia can start suddenly or come on slowly over time. Symptoms include:

- slowness of thought
- difficulty with planning and understanding
- problems with concentration
- mood, personality or behavioural changes
- feeling disoriented and confused
- difficulty walking and keeping balance
- symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, such as problems with memory and language (many people with vascular dementia also have Alzheimer's)

These problems can make daily activities increasingly difficult and someone with the condition may eventually be unable to look after themselves.

Getting medical advice

See your GP if you think you have early symptoms of dementia, especially if you're over 65 years of age. If it's spotted at an early stage, treatment may be able to stop the vascular dementia getting worse, or at least slow it down. If you're worried about someone else, encourage them to make an appointment with their GP and perhaps suggest that you go with them. Your GP can do some simple checks to try to find the cause of your symptoms and they can refer you to a memory clinic or another specialist for further tests if needed.

Tests for vascular dementia

There's no single test for vascular dementia. The following are needed to make a diagnosis:

- an assessment of symptoms – for example, whether there are typical symptoms of vascular dementia
- a full medical history, including asking about a history of conditions related to vascular dementia, such as strokes or high blood pressure
- an assessment of mental abilities – this will usually involve, several tasks and questions to test memory and abilities
- a brain scan, such as an MRI scan or CT scan, to look for any changes that have taken place in the brain

Treatments for vascular dementia

There's currently no cure for vascular dementia and there is no way to reverse any loss of brain cells that occurred before the condition was diagnosed. But treatment can sometimes help slow down vascular dementia.

Treatment aims to tackle the underlying cause, which may reduce the speed at which brain cells are lost. This will often involve:

- eating healthily, losing weight if you're overweight, stopping smoking, getting fit, cutting down on alcohol, taking medication, such as medicines to treat high blood pressure, lower cholesterol or prevent blood clots

Other treatments including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, dementia activities (such as memory cafes) and psychological therapies can help reduce the impact of any existing problems.