

EDUCATION SERIES

# Dementia

## What is Dementia?



## What is dementia?

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of disorders of the brain that disrupt many aspects of daily living. All dementia-related disorders are caused by damage to the nerve cells in the brain.

According to the [Prevalence and Monetary Cost of Dementia in Canada](#) report, published by Alzheimer's Society of Canada (ASC) and Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), dementia is one of the main causes of disability later in life, ahead of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and stroke.

Dementia is **not**:

- a disease
- a normal part of aging\*
- only a senior citizen's ailment
- senility
- reversible

\*In Indigenous communities, dementia is considered a normal part of aging, as life comes full circle. One begins life as a baby, moves through childhood, through adulthood, then elders revert back to a child-like state to return to their creator.

---

## Types of dementia

Just as "vision loss" describes many types of visual impairments, dementia manifests itself in a number of ways. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia, accounting for up to 80% of cases according to the ASC. In fact the ASC claims that one Canadian is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease every seven minutes.

Other types of dementia include:

- **Lewy body dementia**  
(caused by build up of protein in brain cells that affect sleep, mental capacity, movement, and behaviours)
- **Vascular dementia**  
(a form of brain damage resulting from lack of blood supply to the brain)
- **Parkinson's dementia**  
(deterioration of judgement and understanding in some people living with Parkinson's disease)
- **Frontotemporal dementia**  
(caused by loss of nerve cells in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, affecting movement, behaviour, and language)
- **Mixed dementia**  
(simultaneous occurrences of more than one type of dementia, usually both Alzheimer's and vascular)

## Symptoms

Dementia symptoms will display differently depending on the area in the brain that has been damaged, and can fluctuate over time. Symptoms include difficulties making decisions, trouble understanding conversation or speaking, changing moods, memory loss, and more. Fatigue, stress, medication, time of day, and many other factors can affect the severity of symptoms. Most types of dementia are progressive, meaning the symptoms worsen over time.

Dementia can also affect adults aged 40–50, which doctors call “early-onset” dementia. At that age, people are still employed in the workforce, raising a family, or serving as a caregiver to their own senior parents (or all three at once). The devastating effects of early-onset dementia at that stage of life could include social withdrawal, loss or reduction of employment, depression, and even risk of physical harm if one gets lost, falls, or makes mistakes when driving.

---

## Monetary cost of dementia

The cost of dementia in Canada is astronomical. In 2016, the ASC/PHAC report estimated that “the total health care system costs and out-of-pocket costs of caring for people with dementia were \$10.4 billion in 2016, and are projected to double by 2031.”

That report also projected that the amount of unpaid, informal caregiver time (~19.2 million hours / ~1.2 billion dollars) is also projected to double by the same year. Only a vast reduction of dementia cases would help alleviate this expense.

---

## COVID and dementia

The impact of COVID-19 has further challenged people living with dementia as well as the people who care for them. Closures of day programs, deadly conditions in long-term care homes, frightening news stories, and the banning of essential caregivers brought heartache and grief to families already grasping for help, and to those living with dementia, fear and confusion.





# Follow CanAge's campaign to learn more about dementia

Our **A Roadmap for Optimal Health and Wellness in the Area of Dementia and Cognitive Impairment** campaign, launched in 2021, aims to draw attention to several key policy recommendations in this area.

Drawn from the Optimal Health and Wellness chapter in our [VOICES of Canada's Seniors](#) policy book, our [seven recommendations](#) address the serious gaps in support for people living with dementia, as well as for their caregivers.



Learn more at [CanAge.ca/Dementia](https://CanAge.ca/Dementia)



# What else is CanAge doing for those living with dementia in Canada?

In our [Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2021 Federal Budget](#), CanAge recommended that our health system invest in cost-effective preventive care, well-being initiatives, and technology to meet the needs of our aging population, specifically:



**work with key stakeholders** to break down the stigma of dementia and cognitive impairment;



**prioritize investment in technology and digital supports** for dementia and cognitive impairment;



**implement the National Dementia Strategy** (promised in 2019) and ensure adequate investment to operationalize the strategy; and

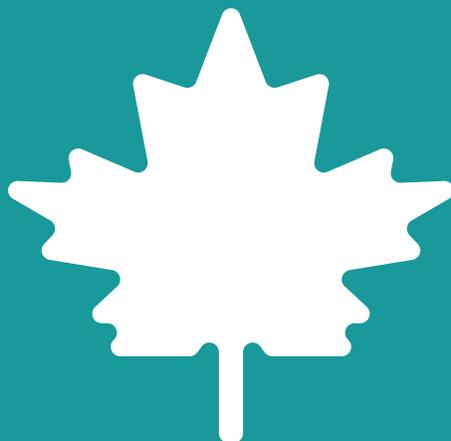


**work with stakeholders** to integrate hospice, palliative, and end-of-life care into dementia supports.

Researchers have projected that **cases of dementia will increase dramatically** as our population continues to live longer. With regards to who has the power to improve the landscape for people living with dementia, a **coordinated effort is required**.



Policy makers, nonprofits, funders, caregivers, and others all have a role to play in ensuring **adequate home supports are available** for people living with early-onset dementia, that **care homes and staff are prepared** for the increase in case loads, and that **best-in-class research is funded** until a cure is found.



[CanAge.ca/Dementia](https://CanAge.ca/Dementia)



Authored by CanAge  
January 2022

---

## Stay Connected with CanAge

- 1** Visit our website  
[CanAge.ca](https://CanAge.ca)
- 2** Become a FREE CanAge member  
Visit [CanAge.ca/join](https://CanAge.ca/join) for your 1 year free membership!
- 3** Follow us on social media
  -  @CanAgeSeniors
  -  CanAgeSeniors
  -  CanAge
  -  CanAge