

## **Dementia is Like Sand Slipping Between Your Fingers; COVID-19 Has Made it Worse**

By George Delgado, MD

Dementia robs patients and families of precious time both in terms of quantity and quality. Although it can be heartbreaking to see a loved one regress mentally, knowing what to expect and how to react can bring comfort to all those involved. The pandemic has heightened fears and worsened isolation that dementia patients experience.

Dementia, a term for diseases that lead to a decline in memory, thinking, speech and physical abilities, is caused by degeneration of the brain. Since the brain controls most bodily functions, eventually the entire body is affected.

- Approximately 60-70% of dementias are caused by Alzheimer's disease. There are about 6 million people in the USA over the age of 65 with Alzheimer's disease, according to the Alzheimer Association. Alzheimer's disease usually progresses gradually and continually.
- About 20% of dementias are due to vascular disease. With vascular dementia, tiny strokes occur in succession leading to a stair-step progression of the dementia, not a gradual decline.
- Around 15% of dementias are due to Lewy bodies. Lewy body dementia has a close link with Parkinson disease. New research is also showing genetic links between Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson disease and Lewy body dementia.

Other research has shown that at least one of the genes that causes amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) can also cause frontotemporal dementia. We used to think that ALS only led to muscle wasting. Now we know it can also cause dementia.

The most obvious symptom of dementia is memory loss. At first it might be attributed to simple forgetfulness. As it progresses, people with dementia may begin to get lost and forget to how to do simple tasks such as tying a necktie. Word selection and speech can also be affected. Later in the disease, walking and the control of the bladder and the bowels are affected. Some patients with dementia hallucinate or have delusions (false thoughts).

Medications can help people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. They can slightly decrease symptoms and slow the progression of the disease. Antipsychotic medicines are sometimes used when behaviors or abnormal thoughts become a problem. When Alzheimer's disease reaches the end stage, the medicines that slow the disease progression lose their effectiveness. More care is needed, and there are increased burdens on family members.

Perhaps the best treatment for all types of dementia is tender loving care from family and friends. Close contact with loved ones is critical to keep patients calm and reassured. When people with dementia are having trouble swallowing, patient hand feeding can make a huge difference.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been very hard on people with dementia. They have been robbed of precious time with their families. In facilities, dining rooms and activity halls that used to bustle with activity are now mostly ghost towns. Isolation leads to fear and confusion in people with dementia. One wonders if the COVID-19 prevention measures are worse than COVID-19 itself.

