

Forgotten, but not gone

Chances are, as you grow older someone close to you will be diagnosed with dementia - a progressive loss of cognitive abilities, such as memory, significant enough to have an impact on a person's daily activities.

The stats tell us that it's an increasingly common illness. About 70,000 people in Aotearoa are currently living with the disease, and by 2050 this is projected to balloon to 170,000. It is natural to view it with fear, but with growing research, education, medication options, lifestyle changes and understanding, the future doesn't need to look as dim as we first imagined.



Whether dementia has touched your world yet or not, it's worth considering these questions. How can we remove the stigma surrounding it, and then work to delay its progression? How can we improve the day-to-day lives of those living with cognitive decline?

How does one get diagnosed, and what happens next?

It is often a loved one who notices a difference. Examples of changes could include:

- Memory and language could begin to falter – for example a person might forget words or use the wrong ones
- Motor activities and coordination to manage things like doing up buttons could become a problem
- Concentrating, planning or organising skills are impaired
- Recognising or identifying objects change
- Confusion, poor concentration, mood changes and difficulty with everyday tasks

Unusual social behaviours

If you notice an accumulation of these differences in a loved one and it concerns you, gently suggest a trip to the GP for a check up. Dementia New Zealand lists some useful ideas on their website (dementia.nz) for how to manage this doctor's trip and come away with a successful outcome.

It would be useful to let the GP know about your concerns prior to an appointment so they are engaged and prepared. To reduce time pressure, consider booking a double appointment, and come prepared with an honest list of concerns and any incidents that have occurred.

Getting an early diagnosis can be a blessing, allowing the person and their whānau time to adjust, access support, come to terms with what is happening, plan for the future and make choices about how they might choose to live in the next few years.

Across the globe, there is ongoing scientific research into how doctors arrive at the dementia diagnosis of Alzheimers, or evidence of whether a person is even likely to develop Alzheimers in the future.

In early 2024, the UK-based news source *'The Times'* published an article entitled "Alzheimer's blood test detects risk 15 years before symptoms". According to the article "...scientists in Sweden have taken a simple testing kit that is already commercially available to researchers, and found that it can detect proteins in the blood, which can cause Alzheimer's and start to build up on the brain 10 to 15 years before symptoms start showing." According to Bart De Strooper, a professor of Alzheimer's research at University College London (UCL), "the findings bring us very close to a blood test for Alzheimer's disease that can be used in daily practice."

With this sort of research and development, perhaps in the not too distant future we could get a regular, routine diagnosis screening test once we reach the risk age for the disease to begin to develop.

Technology is also playing a part in early diagnosis. Researchers have found that virtual reality technology could be key in diagnosing Alzheimer's disease in its early stages, according to Australia's 'Aged Care Guide' website. New results suggest that difficulty with spatial awareness in middle-aged people may be an indicator of Alzheimer's disease later in life.

During the study, researchers asked participants to 'navigate within a virtual environment while wearing VR (virtual reality) headsets'. VR headsets incorporate sight and hearing through technology which creates an alternative environment to the one they are physically in. The headset fits over the person's eyes and ears and sensors within the headset change the perspective of the virtual environment.

Although this innovative research still needs more work to develop the use of virtual reality, used in conjunction with blood and other tests, it could help diagnose the potential for the development of Alzheimer's disease earlier.

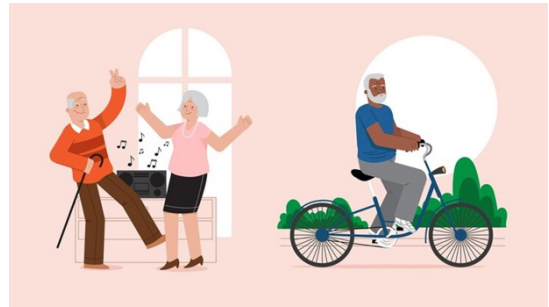
Reducing the risk

Some risk factors for Alzheimer's disease and dementia, like age or genetics, can't be helped, however there are other factors we can have a chance at influencing.

- **Lifestyle habits:** Regular physical activity, being socially active, keeping a healthy diet and alcohol consumption to a minimum. Avoid smoking.



- **Avoid eating lots of ultra processed foods.** Fizzy drinks, burgers, cakes and sweets are doing no favours to your brain health, according to a large trial linking the ultra-processed food products to stroke and dementia.
- **Adopt good sleeping habits** such as going to bed and getting up at consistent times or avoiding bright or blue light in bed, like that of screens.
- **Play an instrument:** Being musical is a way of harnessing the brain's agility and resilience.
- **Engage in brain games and puzzles.** These serve as mental exercise that may help reduce the risk of cognitive decline. Brain training apps have become increasingly popular in recent years, offering a convenient and accessible way for seniors to exercise their brains and improve mental agility. These apps feature a variety of games and exercises designed to challenge different cognitive skills such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. For example Bingo, Chess or Word Search.
- **Stay creative and connected.** A quick look on the Alzheimers New Zealand website show's a wonderful selection of free, engaging and fun group activities to encourage participation and staying active. Check out alzheimers.org.nz.
- **Stay engaged socially.** A recent study by our neighbours over the Tasman showed loneliness increases the risk of dementia by 40 per cent for older Australians. That's a great reason to stay connected to friends, family members and local community groups.



What happens if you get a diagnosis?

Nothing has to change immediately! Dementia NZ suggests that for some people one of the best ways of coming to terms with a diagnosis is to talk to other people who have already crossed this bridge. Their website says:

“Discussing hopes and fears with others facing the same issues can help reduce some of the anxiety and sense of aloneness that a diagnosis can bring, both for people with dementia and those who are supporting them. Understanding that a diagnosis does not change who a person is and that it is possible to still enjoy a good quality of life is an important part of learning to live well with dementia.”

Somewhere down the line you will need to make some changes though and that will involve considering where to live.

Staying at home in a family environment vs going into a care facility

The choice of at home care or a care facility can depend on your culture. It is more common for those from a Pacific Island or Maori background to choose to keep living at home with the support of family and community help. For those who choose that route, Dementia NZ has activity respite programs, and every region has organisations which can help. For example, Brain Tree (www.canterburybraincollective.org) is an innovative facility in Ōtautahi, Christchurch, that supports people living with neurological

conditions to live well in the community. Their purpose is to enable people with a neurological condition to keep living a life full of potential. They provide a practical, everyday support with a total-wellness approach covering exercise, diet, cognitive stimulation, education and social connection – which has been proven to have a hugely positive impact on the lives of those living with neurological conditions.



If moving into residential care will ensure your loved one's safety and quality of life, the next step is to find a new home that will look after them as lovingly as you have. Research is key, and visiting agedadvisor.nz is a great place to start. Aged Advisor collects independent aged care reviews on rest home and retirement care facilities across New Zealand.

Once you have shortlisted what you think might be suitable new home options, simply visit the facilities on agedadvisor.nz for non-biased views shared by family, staff, residents and whānau. Some good questions to ask when searching for the right place to live are:

- What's different and special about the facility's dementia care?
- What is their philosophy of care?
- How are the staff trained and supported to care for people living with dementia?
- How does that facility support family members wishing to spend time with their loved ones?
- What levels of care do they offer?

Some innovative options are beginning to spring up as those in the industry begin to prepare for the 1 in 10 Kiwis expected to be diagnosed. With the projected increase of dementia in the coming years in mind, Ryman Healthcare has rebuilt its model from the ground up, resulting in the myRyman Life programme.

In a Stuff article from September 2023, their project specialist, Caroline Bartle, notes, "It's...about spontaneity, happiness and connection with others, themselves and their environment. We provide activities both inside and out that help our residents to reconnect with the lives they lived before they came to us."

All of Ryman Healthcare's New Zealand villages, from Whangarei to Invercargill, have now gained Dementia Friendly Accreditation as recognised by Alzheimers New Zealand. Specialist dementia care is offered at 32 of their villages, and all have dementia friendly gardens.

Similarly, nine Summerset villages offer a specialised Memory Care centre. Their website comments that they "provide modern apartment style living with innovative design to create a world-class environment for people living with dementia. Coupled with resident centric philosophy to improve the lives of people living with dementia, residents enjoy a welcoming atmosphere designed specifically for them."

Perhaps it's time New Zealand care and villages followed in the path of our Australian neighbours, who have begun to think about how they can accommodate the growing numbers of residents with dementia. At The Prince Charles Hospital, on Brisbane's northside, a village-like community area named 'Charlie's village' has been developed within the Cognitive Assessment and Management (CAM) Unit – the extended care ward that cares for patients with dementia and other cognitive impairments. The idea is to present a space which gives those suffering a sense of the familiar, and includes familiar facades like a hairdresser, bakery, and post office. Being in a hospital-type setting can be distressing, so Charlie's Village allows residents to wander in a safe and familiar environment.

Where to find help:

MATE WAREWARE: <https://www.matewareware.co.nz> This website provides information for whānau on how to manage mate wareware as well as information about what actions and behaviours can be adopted across the life span to help prevent this disease. Can also be accessed as an app on both Android and Apple phones.

DEMENTIA NZ: <https://dementia.nz/> or Freephone 0800 433 636. Providing information, support for all ages, resources, advice, meetings and more for people caring for family/whanau affected by dementia in New Zealand.

ALZHEIMERS NZ: <https://alzheimers.org.nz/> or Freephone 0800 004 001. Support, information, education programmes and services for individuals and family/whanau affected by dementia in New Zealand.

Reference: Aged Advisor 2025