



British Heart  
Foundation



**DementiaUK**  
Helping families face dementia

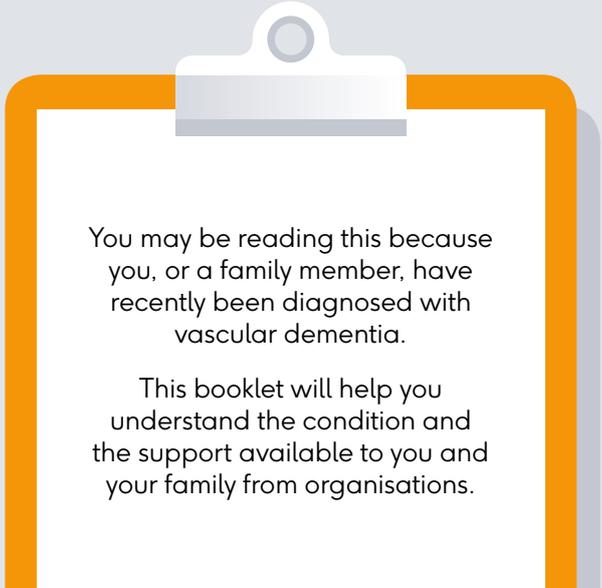
# Understanding vascular dementia



# What is vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia is a type of dementia that happens when there's a problem with the blood supply to an area of the brain. The cells in the affected part of the brain don't get enough oxygen or nutrients and start to die.

1 in 6 people over the age of 80 have dementia, although it can affect people of all ages. Vascular dementia is the second most common type of dementia after Alzheimer's disease.



You may be reading this because you, or a family member, have recently been diagnosed with vascular dementia.

This booklet will help you understand the condition and the support available to you and your family from organisations.

# What are the signs and symptoms of vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia can affect people in different ways because any part of the brain can be damaged.

People may develop symptoms suddenly or over time. Vascular dementia is a progressive condition which means symptoms will probably get worse, but there's lots of support to help you live well, for as long as possible.

Early signs and symptoms can include:



Difficulty with language



Increasing difficulty with skills such as reading or driving



Concentration problems



Difficulty with decision making and planning



Mood and personality changes



Difficulty with daily activities such as paying with money



Feeling confused



If you or someone you care for has noticed the signs above, you should visit your GP as soon as possible.

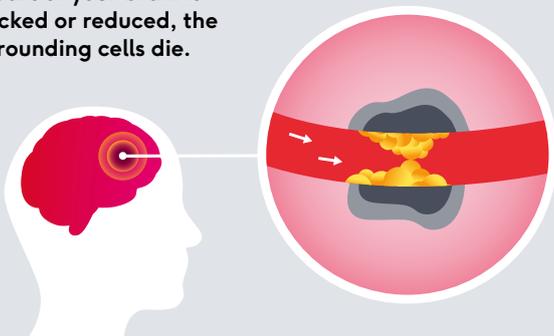
# Causes of vascular dementia

Vascular dementia happens because the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off or reduced. This means oxygen isn't able to get to your brain's cells, causing them to die. This might occur following a stroke, a series of mini strokes (transient ischaemic attacks), or over time, due to damage to blood vessels in the brain.

Many of the factors that increase your risk of other circulatory diseases, such as stroke, also increase your risk of developing vascular dementia.

If you've had a stroke or have a heart condition called atrial fibrillation, which isn't being treated, your risk is also higher.

When the blood supply to part of your brain is blocked or reduced, the surrounding cells die.



# Risk factors you can control:



High blood pressure



High cholesterol level



Poorly controlled diabetes



Smoking



An unhealthy diet



Not doing enough physical activity



Being overweight or obese



Drinking too much alcohol

If you're aged 40-74 and live in England you can get a free NHS health check which looks at your risk of developing heart and circulatory diseases.



Find out more about any risk factors and what you can do about them at [bhf.org.uk/riskfactors](https://www.bhf.org.uk/riskfactors)

## Risk factors you can't control:



### Family history:

If one of your family has coronary heart disease or has had a stroke



### Ethnicity:

You're at higher risk if you have a South Asian, African or Caribbean background



### Getting older:

You're more at risk as you get older



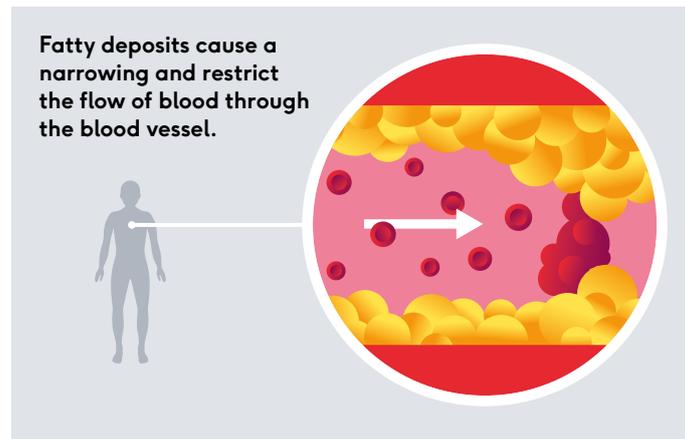
### Gender:

Men are more at risk than women

## How is vascular dementia linked to the heart?

Your heart supplies blood to the entire body – including your brain – through a network of blood vessels known as your circulatory system.

Over time blood vessels can become narrowed or blocked by a clot. If this happens in one of the blood vessels supplying your heart muscle it can lead to a heart attack. If this happens in one of the blood vessels in your brain, it can lead to vascular dementia, a stroke or both.



Learn about the links between atrial fibrillation, stroke and vascular dementia at [bhf.org.uk/conditions](https://bhf.org.uk/conditions)



Find out more about the heart and circulatory system at [bhf.org.uk/theheart](https://bhf.org.uk/theheart)

# How is vascular dementia diagnosed?

If you suspect you, or a loved one, may have vascular dementia it's important to talk to your GP as soon as possible. Your GP will:

- talk to you about your symptoms and medical history
- carry out routine tests, e.g. pulse and blood pressure
- arrange blood tests
- do a physical examination
- do some cognitive ability tests.

Your GP may also talk to a close relative to gain further information on your daily routine and skills, with your permission. If your GP isn't able to make a diagnosis, you might be referred to a specialist or memory clinic. You may then have a scan of your brain. This can usually show damage which will help accurately diagnose your condition.



It's important to get an accurate diagnosis in order to get the right information and support.

# What treatment is available?

**There is currently no cure for vascular dementia but there's lots of help and support for someone living with the condition.**

You might be given medication to control high blood pressure or high cholesterol if this has contributed to your condition. If you have vascular dementia, medication given for Alzheimer's disease isn't recommended. However you may be given this medication if you have a mixed diagnosis of vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

**Research has shown that improving your lifestyle can help slow down vascular dementia's progression.**



Eating better



Stopping smoking



Keeping mentally and physically active



Social activities can also help with communication and memory



For more support contact Dementia UK's Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline on 0800 888 6678.

## Dianne's story

**Dianne was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2013. She's now started a support group, and learnt techniques to maintain her independence.**

"After my diagnosis I had an occupational therapist, who taught me skills to look after myself.

I write things in a diary as soon as I learn about them, and I always put my keys in one place.

And I started a weekly memory project in my church to get people to enjoy a meal and conversation together. Getting out and getting involved makes a big difference."



# Living with vascular dementia

If you've been diagnosed with vascular dementia you can continue to live well for many years. However, it's understandable to feel overwhelmed, worried or upset. It can be helpful to let the information sink in and seek support from friends and family. You can then start to access information and support which will help you plan for the future.

Vascular dementia is a progressive condition so it's likely you'll need further support from family, friends and support services at some point.

You should also make regular appointments with your GP or memory clinic so they can keep an eye on your general health and monitor your condition. You can also take a carer or family member with you for support.

When you're diagnosed, it's important for you and your family to discuss any help you might need in the future, taking into account your preferences. Although this can be hard, it's important that both you and your family feel able to get the support you need, when you need it. This way, you'll continue to live an active life for as long as possible.



More information on living with vascular dementia can be found at [dementiauk.org](https://dementiauk.org)

Although you might not need help now there may be a time when you need support from:

## Healthcare professionals

Your GP, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, or a specialist dementia nurse (such as an Admiral Nurse).

## Social services

You may be able to access support by having an assessment of your needs.

## Charities

Including Age UK, Alzheimer's Society and Dementia UK.

## Private care and support services

Such as paid carers or 'meals on wheels'.



## Use this space to make notes for discussions with your doctor

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**We want to beat heartbreak forever. Thanks to our research we've made vital discoveries into the diagnosis and treatment of heart and circulatory diseases. But more still needs to be done.**

Help us continue to fund life saving research into conditions like vascular dementia.



Visit [bhf.org.uk](https://www.bhf.org.uk) to make a donation or find out more

## For more information

You can find out more about the topics we've covered in some of our other resources:

### Booklets

- Stroke – your quick guide
- Atrial fibrillation
- Stop smoking
- Blood pressure
- Blood cholesterol

### To order our booklets or DVDs

- Call 0300 200 2222
- Email [orderline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:orderline@bhf.org.uk)
- Or visit [bhf.org.uk/publications](https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications)

## Contact

For more information visit the British Heart Foundation website [bhf.org.uk](https://www.bhf.org.uk) or for more information on vascular dementia, visit Dementia UK's website [dementiauk.org](https://www.dementiauk.org)

### Dementia UK's Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline – 0800 888 6678

(from 9am-9pm weekdays and 9am-5pm weekends) for information on dementia.

### BHF Heart Helpline – 0300 330 3311

(from 9am-5pm weekdays and a similar cost to 01 and 02 numbers) for information and support on anything heart-related.

**bhf.org.uk**

We are built on breakthroughs. Heart transplants. Clot busting drugs. Pacemakers. Breakthroughs born from visionary medical research. Research you fund with your donations.

Heart and circulatory diseases kill 1 in 4 people in the UK. They cause heartbreak on every street. But if we can invent machines to restart hearts, fix arteries in newborn babies, build tiny devices to correct heartbeats, and if we can give someone a heart they weren't born with - imagine what's next.

We research all heart and circulatory diseases and the things that cause them. Heart diseases, stroke, vascular dementia, diabetes and many more. All connected, all under our microscope. Our research is the promise of future cures and treatments.

The promise to protect the people we love. Our children. Our parents. Our brothers. Our sisters. Our grandparents. Our closest friends.

**You and the British Heart Foundation.  
Together, we will beat heartbreak forever.**

**Beat heartbreak forever.**

Beat heartbreak from  heart diseases  stroke  vascular dementia  diabetes

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