Is It Dementia?

A Cheat Sheet to Ensure a Faster and Better Dementia Assessment

By Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH
BetterHealthWhileAging.net

If you’re concerned that your parent or loved one may have Alzheimer’s or a related dementia, you want a fast and effective diagnosis.

You don’t want this to take forever, or for it to be done incorrectly. You also don’t want to get lost in the system – on an endless loop of medical visits with no real outcome.

It’s best to start by bringing your parent to the doctor or primary care provider (PCP) for an initial evaluation. It’s easier and faster to get an appointment with a generalist than with a neurologist or memory clinic.

But you need to be careful. After all, you don’t want your concerns to be waved off by a busy doctor. (And yes, this often happens.)

Nor do you want your parent diagnosed with Alzheimer’s when in fact the problems may be due to other factors. Doctors should check that the symptoms aren’t caused by things like medication side-effects, another medical illness, or other medical problems. Fortunately, you can help ensure this doesn’t happen.

That’s right. With a little preparation, you can ensure your relative receives a faster and better initial evaluation from your doctor.

The information in this cheat sheet will help you do this.

For more details, be sure to read the full article: How We Diagnose Dementia: The Practical Basics to Know.
The 5 Key Dementia Criteria Doctors Must Assess

It’s important to understand what should happen in an initial evaluation for dementia, including Alzheimer’s. So here’s a quick run-down on what the doctor needs to consider in order to evaluate possible dementia.

The doctor needs to assess for 5 key criteria. For a diagnosis of dementia, all five of the following statements need to be true.

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<th>Key Dementia Criterion</th>
<th>How Doctor Might Assess</th>
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| 1. A person is having difficulty with one or more types of mental function. This may be memory problems, or other functions such as learning, language or other cognitive functions. | - Short office-based cognitive testing, such as the Montreal Cognitive Assessment test or Mini-Mental State exam. These tests assess memory, language, concentration and other functions.  
- Ask family about current problems with thinking, including memory, judgement, organization, finances, or driving. |
| 2. The difficulties are a decline from the person’s prior level of ability. The difficulties should be relatively new in that the person has previously been able to perform these tasks. | - Review patient's educational and career history.  
- Ask family how thinking abilities have changed compared to months or years ago. |
### Key Dementia Criterion

| 3. **The problems are bad enough to impair daily life function.**  
The problems need to impact the things a person does as part of their daily life. | **How Doctor Might Assess**  
- Find out if the patient is having difficulty managing life tasks, or living independently.  
- Obtain information from family members and others, since patients often cannot reliably provide this information. |
|---|---|
| 4. **The problems are not due to a reversible condition.**  
Some conditions can cause – or worsen – dementia-like symptoms, such as depression or medication side-effects. | **How Doctor Might Assess**  
- Evaluate for medical problems that can cause memory or thinking problems, such as thyroid problems, vitamin B12 deficiency, electrolyte disturbances. This usually requires an examination and bloodwork.  
- Review medications carefully, and check for those known to affect thinking. |
| 5. **The problems aren't better accounted for by another mental disorder.**  
That is, the person isn't experiencing a different ailment such as depression or schizophrenia. | **How Doctor Might Assess**  
- Review patient's mental health history.  
- Assess for symptoms of depression, especially frequent sadness or loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities.  
- Consider the possibility of substance abuse and/or withdrawal.  
- Consider assessing for other mental health conditions. |
As you can see, the first three items on this list are **much easier to assess correctly and quickly if a family comes prepared to share their observations and knowledge of the person.**

Information from family members and friends can also make it much easier for the doctor to assess for depression, substance abuse, and other mental health problems.

Last but not least, if your parent has been seen by other doctors or been hospitalized, you can speed things by making sure the primary care provider has copies of the relevant medical information.
# 7 Steps to Help Your Doctor Make an Assessment

If you plan to have a doctor evaluate your parent or relative, here’s how to prepare so they can give you a faster and better dementia assessment.

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<th>Steps to Help</th>
<th>More Information</th>
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| 1. Write down worrisome behaviors and problems, and bring this list to the visit. Write a one-page summary that you can give to the doctor. | You can start with these 8 behaviors to track if you’re concerned about Alzheimer’s:  
- Poor judgment  
- Reduced interest in leisure activities  
- Repeating themselves  
- Difficulty learning to use something new  
- Forgetting the year or month  
- Difficulty managing money and finances  
- Problems with appointments and commitments  
- Daily struggles with memory or thinking  
(This list is an extract of [8 Alzheimer’s Behaviors to Track](#), which contains more information.) |
| 2. Consider who else might know how your parent has been doing and behaving recently. | Think about other family members, close friends or carers who may also have observed differing behavior.  
Ask them to share their observations with you and write down what they tell you. Share these notes, along with the names of the informants, with your parent’s doctor. |
<p>| 3. Be ready to explain how your parent’s abilities have changed. Write a one-page summary that you can give to the doctor. | Think about different scenarios that illustrate your parent’s abilities before you noticed these changes, and their abilities now. |</p>
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| 4. Be prepared to explain how your parent is struggling to manage daily life tasks, such as work, house chores, shopping, driving, or any other common tasks. Write down any daily activities (ADLs or IADLs) your parent is having difficulty with. Give these notes to the doctor. | Don’t let the acronyms baffle you. You may hear people refer to ADLs, BADLs, and IADLs. Here’s what you need to know. ADLs stands for activities of daily living. These are sometimes called BADLs, or basic activities of daily living. These are basic self-care tasks such as feeding, toileting, selecting proper attire, grooming, maintaining continence, putting on clothes, Bathing, walking and transferring (such as moving from bed to wheelchair). These are tasks we initially learn as young children. IADLs are instrumental activities of daily living. These are the complex skills needed to successfully live independently which are often learned during our teens, and include:  
- Managing finances  
- Handling transportation (driving or navigating public transit)  
- Shopping  
- Preparing meals  
- Using the telephone and other communication devices  
- Managing medications  
- Housework and basic home maintenance  
Together, ADLs and IADLs represent the skills that people usually need to be able to manage in order to live as independent adults. |
| 5. Bring information about any recent hospitalizations or illnesses.     | Hospitalizations and serious illnesses often cause delirium. This is a state of worse-than-usual mental function brought on by stress to the body. Delirium can take weeks or longer to resolve. So that the doctor can evaluate your parent for dementia, they need know about any recent serious illnesses. |
### Steps to Help

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<td>6.</td>
<td>Bring information about any history of depression, depressive symptoms, substance abuse, or other history of mental illness.</td>
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<td>The most important symptoms to discuss are signs of persisting sadness, and loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities.</td>
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<td>It will help the doctor to know if your parent has had depression in the past, or even a “melancholy personality.”</td>
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<td>You should also discuss any history or concerns related to substance abuse.</td>
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<td>Be sure to tell the doctor if your parent has experienced other mental illnesses.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Obtain copies of the patient’s medical information and bring them to the dementia evaluation visit.</td>
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<td>This is especially important if your parent sees multiple doctors, or has recently been to the hospital or emergency room.</td>
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<td>The most useful information to bring is laboratory results and any imaging of the brain, such as CAT scans or MRIs.</td>
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<td>It’s also useful to bring:</td>
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<td>• A list of chronic health conditions</td>
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<td>• An up-to-date list of medication, including over-the-counter medications and supplements</td>
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<td>• Other laboratory test results</td>
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<td>• Radiology and imaging (e.g. X-ray) results</td>
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<td>• Other medical reports (e.g. EKGs, biopsy results)</td>
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<td>• Hospital and emergency department reports</td>
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<td>• List of doctors and healthcare providers involved in your loved one’s care.</td>
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<td>(This list of things to bring is an extract of <a href="#">10 Useful Types of Medical Information to Bring to a New Doctor</a>, which contains more information. Also see <a href="#">4 Types of Brain-Slowing Medication to Avoid if You’re Worried About Memory</a>.)</td>
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Take these 7 steps and you’ll help your loved one enormously. Their doctor will have far more information to feed into their assessment.
That will make the assessment quicker and easier. It will also make the evaluation more accurate.

Because the more information the doctor has, the more quickly they can complete their preliminary evaluation.

And that's what you want: to know whether your parent meets the five criteria for dementia. That way you and the doctors know what you’re dealing with, and what to expect for the future.

About Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH

Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH, is a practicing geriatrician who believes it should be easier for older adults to have the best possible health and quality of life as they age.

Through her website Better Health While Aging, she provides practical information on how to address many common health problems that affect older adults. She also addresses common concerns and dilemmas related to helping older parents and other aging relatives.

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