


# TRAIN YOUR BRAIN

Dementia is a rising problem not just in Singapore, but the world over as life expectancy levels rise. Keeping the mind active and ensuring healthy mental well-being is important through the years, say the experts.

**W**hat do former Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, actors Charles Bronson and Rita Hayworth and boxer Sugar Ray Robinson have in common? On top of being some of the most respected individuals in their fields, they have all suffered from dementia.

Dementia is an illness which affects the brain, causing the brain cells to die at a faster rate than normal. This is unlike normal ageing. As a result, the mental abilities of a person with dementia declines. This leads to failing memory, a deterioration of intellectual function and personality changes. With the higher life expectancy levels, dementia is set to rise among the global population.

There are several types of dementia: Alzheimer's disease and multi-infarct dementia (also known as vascular dementia) frontotemporal dementia, Lewy Body dementia, alcohol-related dementia, and so on. A/Professor Chiam Peak Chiang, a senior consultant at the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) Geriatric Psychiatry department says the most common cause of dementia in the elderly is Alzheimer's disease, followed by vascular dementia. Health complications that could lead to dementia include neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease; the chronic ingestion of alcohol and infections such as HIV and neurosyphilis. 



BY MICHELLE BONG WITH CONSULTATION FROM A/PROFESSOR CHIAM PEAK CHIANG, SENIOR CONSULTANT AT THE DEPARTMENT OF GERIATRIC PSYCHIATRY AT THE INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

## THE SEVEN STAGES OF DEMENTIA

An incurable disease, dementia progressively develops over time in terms of mild to severe cognitive impairment. Medical experts say the amount of time spent in each stage is subjective to patients; some cover all the stages in less than five years, while others can live several decades after an early-stage diagnosis. Here is a breakdown of how the mind degenerates.

### Stage 1 – No cognitive impairment

Patients do not suffer from memory problems and none are evident to a health care professional during medical assessments.

### Stage 2 – Very mild cognitive decline

Patients tend to complain about memory lapses; in particular, they have problems recalling words or names, or even where they've placed everyday objects such as keys or spectacles. But these problems may not be glaringly apparent to those around them.

### Stage 3 – Mild cognitive decline

Deficiencies and little struggles start to be noticed by those around the patient, and medical assessments will verify these. Common difficulties include:

- ▶ Problems in remembering words and names
- ▶ Losing or misplacing valuable objects
- ▶ Problems in planning or organising daily tasks

### Stage 4 – Moderate cognitive decline

At this stage, clear-cut deficiencies are obvious in the following areas:

- ▶ Minimal knowledge of recent occasions or current events
- ▶ Struggles to perform mental tasks such as buying groceries or paying bills
- ▶ Problems in remembering one's own personal history

### Stage 5 – Moderately severe cognitive decline

Major gaps in memory and deficits in cognitive function emerge, and assistance is required with day-to-day activities. Patients may:

- ▶ Be unable to provide important details (e.g. current address, telephone number)
- ▶ Become confused about where they are, or what the date or time is
- ▶ Have trouble with less challenging mental 'exercises' such as counting backwards
- ▶ Require help to pick appropriate clothes for any given occasion

### Stage 6 – Severe cognitive decline

Memory difficulties continue to worsen, and personality changes become more apparent. Extensive help with regular daily activities come vital. Patients may:

- ▶ Lose most awareness of recent experiences and events, and their surroundings
- ▶ Recognise loved ones, but occasionally forget the name of their primary caregiver
- ▶ Need help getting dressed properly or dress inappropriately e.g. pairing a pyjama tops with smart pants
- ▶ Have increasing episodes of urinary or faecal incontinence
- ▶ Experience significant personality changes and behavioural symptoms such as suspiciousness and delusions (for instance, believing that their caregiver is trying to harm them) and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not really there)
- ▶ Tend to wander off and become lost

### Stage 7 – Very severe cognitive decline

This is the final stage of the disease when patients experience a real uphill struggle in almost all areas of their lives. Patients lose the ability to:

- ▶ Recognise communication, though they may still say words or phrases occasionally
- ▶ Eat or visit the toilet by themselves, and suffer from urine incontinence
- ▶ Walk without assistance, sit without support, smile or hold their heads up. Reflexes dull considerably, and muscles grow rigid. Swallowing would also be impaired.





### HELPLINE FOR CAREGIVERS

NAME	TELEPHONE
Dementia Helpline (Alzheimer's Disease Association, Caregiver Support Service)	6737-5667
SAGE Counselling Centre	1800-3538633
Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)	1800-2214444

Treatment and management for this incurable affliction, she adds, is biopsychosocial. She explains: "These involve medications for the cognition, behavioural and psychological symptoms; psychological counselling of caregivers; behavioural management for behavioural problems; and the management of social issues. Management is for as long as the patient needs it."

### BEING IN CONTROL

Medications aside, providing high-quality, comprehensive care that will help the patient feel more comfortable and maintain his or her sense of individuality and "keeping the patient mentally and physically active for as long as possible" are key to controlling dementia.

Another option, adds A/Professor Chiam, is ensuring he or she lives a healthy lifestyle — through a sensible diet, exercise routines, and keeping hypertension, diabetes and hypercholesterolemia (commonly known as high cholesterol) under control — to try to prevent strokes. Dementia medications can also be administered to slow down deterioration.

Other than taking care of the patient's physical needs, caregivers should also arm themselves with knowledge of the disease. "They should also learn about dementia — the signs and symptoms, and how to cope with the behavioural problems. If the person is on medication, make sure he/she takes the medication regularly. Understand that the person is suffering from an illness and not deliberately trying to make things difficult for the family," says A/Professor Chiam.

Currently, about 30,000 Singaporeans suffer from dementia. According to the report *Dementia in the Asia Pacific Region: The epidemic is here*, published by Asia Pacific Members of Alzheimer's Disease International, it is estimated that by 2020, about 53,000 of Singaporeans will suffer from dementia. And by 2050, this figure will grow to a projected 187,000. These statistics remain much lower than those in other developed countries, but the Ministry of Health is adopting a pro-active approach to improving mental well-being through various agencies.

These efforts include the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports' (MCYS) Active Aging initiatives, the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Social and Emotional Learning approaches, the Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) Work-life Works (WOW!) initiatives and the People's Association's (PA) Modern Living courses. +

### WHERE TO GET HELP

#### INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Buangkok Green Medical Park  
10 Buangkok View  
For appointments: 6389-2200  
during office hours  
Email: imh\_appt@imh.com.sg

#### TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

Psychological Medicine Clinic  
Level B1, Medical Centre  
Tel: 6357-8002/8003  
www.ttsh.com.sg





## NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS

Ward off dementia by keeping the mind active through the decades.

**A** study by researchers at the National Neuroscience Institute (NNI) recently refuted the notion that dementia only strikes those above 65, because people in their 40's and 50's have been affected by the disease too. There are no statistics here about dementia affecting teenagers and younger adults, but such instances have been apparent in the United States.

Medical experts generally say there is no sure way to prevent the onset of dementia, but agree that staying active could help to keep adults minds sharp and memory loss at bay. It is believed that playing a musical instrument, playing mahjong or cards, dancing, knitting, reading or playing board games help to ward off dementia.

And for the little ones, the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) website ([www.imh.com.sg](http://www.imh.com.sg)) features a ROC-N-ASH portal that allows them to log in and play fun games that challenge them to rescue rulers or save kingdoms from destruction. These are solely educational by nature, and are meant to stimulate young minds and keep them active.