

In-depth overview of vascular dementia: Part one

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In previous articles, we have discussed what dementia exactly is, as well as the many different types of dementia. It's helpful knowing that dementia is an umbrella term that describes a set of symptoms, such as memory loss, personality changes, poor judgment, and language processing issues. We've explored the most common type of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, as well as Lewy Body dementia, a lesser known type. This month's *Memory Moment* focuses on an in-depth overview of vascular dementia. Vascular dementia is a type of dementia that I think about often in terms of my own health. With a family history of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, I'm very aware of my increased risk of this dementia. Part one of this in-depth discussion will focus on the facts of vascular dementia. Next month's article, Part two, will focus on lifestyle changes and managing these chronic conditions that increase risk of developing vascular dementia.

Vascular dementia is widely considered the second most common type of dementia. The main risk factors are increased age and conditions that affect blood flow to the brain. You might have also heard vascular dementia called multi-infarct dementia, alluding to the correlation with strokes. Infarct refers to an area of dead brain tissue resulting in failure of blood supply. There are many conditions that can contribute to poor cardiovascular health or poor blood supply including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease or diabetes. With restricted blood flow, damage in the brain can occur gradually over time or can often result in a major stroke or a series of smaller strokes.

After a major stroke, symptoms are usually very obvious, and might correlate with the area of the brain that was affected. Changes with thinking, memory loss, physical changes such as walking challenges or paralysis, or language changes can be common symptoms after a stroke. Some people might notice slow, gradual change as a result of poor blood supply to the brain. Changes might be difficult to notice at first, but encompass the symptoms previously listed above, as well as mood changes, impaired judgment, and executive functioning.

Diagnosis of vascular dementia encompasses brain imaging such as MRI or CT scans and cognitive testing. Imaging looks for past brain damage that would provide evidence to support the hypothesis of previous strokes or gradual damage. Many experts feel that vascular dementia is underdiagnosed. Vascular dementia often co-occurs with Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia and can be diagnosed together.

While there are not any specific drugs approved to treat vascular dementia, people are often prescribed medications such as Aricept or Namenda that are commonly used for Alzheimer's disease treatment. Vascular dementia treatment is most successful when managing conditions that cause decreased blood flow, like taking medication to manage high blood pressure or diabetes. Further damage can be lessened if underlying conditions are addressed, and if lifestyle and diet changes are implemented to address risk. Next month, we will go further in-depth of why it's important to manage cardiovascular health (spoiler: it's not just because of vascular dementia!) and also discuss manageable ways to reduce your risk.

Much of the information in this article has been condensed from the Alzheimer's Association, Mental Health America, and the American Heart Association websites, which have valuable resources and guidance for families dealing with this disease. Our Forget-Me-Not Resource centers housed in local libraries in Coles, Clay, Cumberland, Effingham, Fayette, Jasper, and Shelby counties, also has valuable books and DVDs devoted to vascular dementia.

For more information about Memory Moment articles & Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.