Vascular Dementia

University of Michigan Health System
Michigan Alzheimer's Disease Research Center

Vascular Dementia (VaD) results in impaired thinking and memory loss. It is caused by one or more strokes. Sometimes these stokes occur "silently", causing no immediate symptoms, but become significant enough over time to cause thinking problems. VaD is thought to be the second leading cause of dementia after Alzheimer's disease.

CAUSE

The cause of VaD is an interruption of blood flow to the brain. When brain tissue is deprived of blood, it dies – this is called an infarct or a stroke. This interruption is often caused by blockages in the small blood vessels or arteries. These blockages can be caused by a build up of plaque on the inside walls of the arteries or by a blood clot. VaD is potentially preventable. The best way to prevent it is to lower your risk of stroke.

Risk factors for stroke include:

- high blood pressure;
- high cholesterol;
- diabetes;
- smoking; and
- heart disease.

SYMPTOMS

A person with vascular dementia may experience:

- memory loss;
- withdrawal from social interaction;
- laughing or crying at inappropriate times;
- loss of movement in one or more areas of the body;
- trouble walking;
- seizures;
- apathy; and
- incontinence.

Unlike Alzheimer's disease, the symptoms of VaD usually have a sudden onset. While Alzheimer's disease is generally marked by a slow and steady decline, VaD is characterized by a stepwise progression with periods of abrupt decline alternating with plateau periods.

DIAGNOSIS

Sometimes vascular dementia is difficult to distinguish between Alzheimer's disease. In many cases, a person may have both vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease, which is referred to as mixed dementia or Alzheimer's disease with stroke. A diagnosis of VaD or mixed dementia is made after a thorough evaluation that includes discussion of symptoms, a physical exam and other testing. Brain imaging techniques, such as CT scans or MRIs are helpful in identifying the stroke-type changes in brain structure caused by VaD.

PROGNOSIS and TREATMENT

Unfortunately, there are no treatments that can reverse the damage that has been done to the brain after it has occurred. However, physical and other therapies can help people recover immediately after a stroke. In addition, medications and lifestyle changes can help prevent additional strokes. Medications used to treat Alzheimer's disease may also be helpful with vascular dementia.