

# Vascular Dementia: A Guide for Patients & Families

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Vascular dementia (VaD) is a type of cognitive decline caused by problems with blood flow to the brain. It can result from strokes or other conditions that damage blood vessels and impair the brain's ability to function properly. VaD is second only to Alzheimer's disease in terms of the most common causes of dementia.

## Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

### Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Difficulty with memory, especially short-term memory
- Difficulty with planning and organizing tasks
- Slower thinking or decision-making
- Trouble following conversations or understanding complex information
- Problems with visual-spatial abilities (e.g., trouble with reading, judging distances)

### Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Mood swings or depression
- Apathy or lack of interest in activities
- Irritability or frustration
- Increased anxiety or agitation

## Typical Presentation & Progression

### Early Stage

- Mild memory issues and difficulty concentrating
- Slight problems with coordination or balance
- Increased difficulty with complex tasks and decision-making

### Middle Stage

- Greater difficulty with memory, especially recent events
- Problems with walking and movement, possibly developing a shuffling gait
- Trouble with speech or communication
- Increased difficulty performing daily activities independently

### Late Stage

- Severe cognitive and memory impairment
- Difficulty walking, requiring assistance or a wheelchair
- Loss of ability to communicate effectively
- Complete dependence for daily activities, such as eating, dressing, and hygiene

## Medications FDA-Approved for Cognitive Symptoms

### Symptom-Targeted Medications

- No specific medications are approved for Vascular Dementia.
- Medications to control high blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes may help prevent further damage to the brain.
- Drugs such as donepezil or memantine, used in Alzheimer's disease, may be prescribed off-label to help with symptoms.

### Disease-Modifying Therapies

- Currently, no disease-modifying therapies are approved for Vascular Dementia.

## Diagnostic Tests Your Healthcare Team May Use

### Clinical & Cognitive Evaluation

- Review of medical history, stroke history, and risk factors such as high blood pressure or diabetes
- Cognitive testing to assess memory, language, and problem-solving abilities

### Laboratory Tests

- Blood tests to check for cholesterol levels, blood sugar, and other factors that may increase the risk of stroke
- Evaluation of vascular risk factors (e.g., blood pressure management)

### Imaging Studies

- MRI or CT scans to detect brain damage caused by strokes or other issues with blood flow
- PET scans may be used to measure brain activity or metabolic changes in the brain

## Planning for the Future

### Healthcare Planning

- Discuss care preferences while the individual is able to communicate them
- Set up advance directives and healthcare power of attorney
- Consider palliative care or hospice care as the condition progresses

### Legal & Financial Planning

- Appoint a durable financial power of attorney
- Review long-term care insurance and options for in-home or assisted living care
- Consult with an elder-care attorney regarding estate planning and legal protections

### Support for Caregivers

- Establish a structured routine for caregiving
- Utilize respite care, support groups, and caregiver education
- Reach out to local and national organizations for guidance and resources

## National Organizations & Resources

- ✓ **\*\*Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline\*\***  
☎ 800-272-3900 | 🌐 [alz.org](https://alz.org)
- ✓ **\*\*National Institute on Aging (NIA) - Alzheimer's & Dementia Information\*\***  
☎ 800-438-4380 | 🌐 [nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers](https://nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers)
- ✓ **\*\*Eldercare Locator\*\***  
☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 [eldercare.acl.gov](https://eldercare.acl.gov)
- ✓ **\*\*National Stroke Association\*\***  
☎ 1-800-STROKES | 🌐 [stroke.org](https://stroke.org)

## Final Notes

- Early detection and management of vascular risk factors can help slow progression and improve quality of life.
- Proper medical management of underlying conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol is crucial.
- Support for caregivers is vital to prevent burnout and ensure the best possible care for the person with vascular dementia.