Dementia is a disorder of the brain in which a person experiences decreasing cognitive abilities.

The brain is a complex organ important for thinking and behavior. Diseases that affect the brain often cause the inability to process or retain new information. Dementia is one example.

Dementia is a medical condition in which there is a worsening in a person's cognitive abilities compared with several months or years before. A person with dementia has difficulty with several types of cognitive abilities, most often with memory but also with language, attention, orientation, judgment, and planning.

Causes
Dementia is caused by brain disease or injury. It can be caused by medical conditions that start in other parts of the body. For example, an abnormal heart rhythm can cause a blood clot to form in the heart, travel to the brain, and block blood flow to a brain region, affecting a person’s thinking. Some diseases that cause dementia start in the brain itself. One of the most common is Alzheimer disease, which affects about 5 million people in the United States. Risk of Alzheimer disease increases as a person gets older. Most often, dementia develops when the brain is affected by 2 or more common diseases of aging, such as Alzheimer disease and stroke.

Symptoms
Although most people do not develop dementia, growing older substantially increases the risk of dementia. Dementia typically begins in the seventh or eighth decade of life and worsens over time. The most common symptom to be noticed first, by the affected person, family, or others, is short-term memory problems. Examples include forgetting where one places things around the home and forgetting recent conversations. In dementia, these problems happen frequently (several times a day and over many months or years) and affect the ability to properly function in day-to-day life. Other problems include withdrawing from hobbies or social events, anxiety or depression, difficulty with daily tasks such as remembering to take medications, and difficulty with directions such as when driving.

Diagnostic Evaluation
The diagnosis of dementia requires a clinician to take a medical history to identify whether cognitive abilities have worsened over time and whether this worsening is associated with functional problems such as with day-to-day tasks (shopping, paying bills, driving). A family member or friend should confirm the presence of cognitive decline and functional problems. The clinician needs to conduct a short cognitive (memory) test and physical examination to evaluate strength, reflexes, and other neurological signs. Typically, a few blood tests and a brain scan are also done. Other tests are rarely needed.