



Understanding hallucinations

Many people living with dementia experience changes in behaviour. Understanding the causes of these changes can help you respond.

What are hallucinations?

A hallucination is when you see something that actually isn't there or where you hear something, music, voices that don't exist. One can also have smell, taste and touch hallucinations.

Hallucinations are a common symptom of dementia but not all people who experience hallucinations are distressed by them.

What are the signs of hallucinations?

It can be difficult to know if a person living with dementia is experiencing hallucinations, especially if they are not able to communicate their thoughts or experiences.

Signs may include:

- Describing they are seeing unusual things/objects
- Saying something happened that didnt happen
- Accusing someone of something
- Hearing voices/noises

'If a person is experiencing hallucinations, they may be exhibiting other behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia. There is a strong link between hallucinations and aggression for instance.'

Why do people living with dementia experience hallucinations?

There are a number of reasons why hallucinations might occur in dementia.

- Changes to the brain due to dementia
- Infection, delirium, pain
- Hallucinations can be more common if there is sensory impairment. For example, if someone is not wearing their glasses, they are more likely to have visual hallucinations. Similarly, someone who is deaf and is not wearing their hearing aid is more likely to have auditory hallucinations
- There are other causes of hallucinations, particularly the side effects of some drugs and also drug withdrawal. More rare causes of hallucinations can be related to epilepsy or even brain tumours.

What can I do to help?

- Not all hallucinations cause the person distress and therefore may not require a response. If the family or friends are distressed by the hallucinations support the family to understand.
- Remember that what the person is experiencing is real to them and may make them angry or feel frightened (some may know they are not real).
- Validate their feelings: let the person know that you understand what they are feeling and believing.
- Speak to their GP about possible physical causes, such as delirium, dehydration, infections, or reactions to medication.
- Get the person's eye health and vision checked. Hallucinations may be related to some eye conditions that can cause vision loss.

This information has been compiled with the assistance of Professor Sue Kurrle, Geriatrician.

Disclaimer: This information is a guide only and is not a replacement for medical care by a qualified professional.



Is the change sudden and severe?

Is it a life threatening or emergency situation?

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