

Visual Perception & Dementia

Functional Information & Suggestions

Visual perception is a combination of how our eyes take in visual information, and how our brain processes it. Visual impairments and brain changes due to dementia all effect visual perception.

What's the connection between sensory impairments and dementia?

It's complicated, and there's a lot that we don't fully understand.

Age-related decline in vision, hearing and smell are very common. Congenital issues, diseases, and injuries can also impair senses.

Some diseases, like vascular disease, can cause both cognitive decline and sensory impairment. Loss of smell is associated with Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, vascular dementia, and frontotemporal degeneration.

Posterior Cortical Atrophy is a form of dementia that primarily affects vision.

There is some research that suggests that treating vision and hearing loss, through cataract surgery and hearing aids, may reduce the risk of dementia.

Sensory impairments can change how the brain perceives information

- Because the brain is working harder to see, hear, or take in other sensory information, it may not be able to hold as much information in working memory – so it can be harder to think clearly
- Sensory impairments can contribute to social isolation, depression, and reduced activity

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It is not our intention to endorse or recommend the sites.

Functional Information & Suggestions (continued)

Dementia can change how the brain perceives sensory information. You may not know if dementia or visual problems are the cause, or both.

- Slower ability to adjust to changes in light
- Reduced depth perception, so that a pattern may look like a 3-d object, e.g. trying to pick up a flower pattern in a rug
- Seeing dark areas on the floor as a hole or lower area, so that the person hesitates while walking
- Not seeing colors or contrast between objects as well, so that it's hard to grab something or move to the correct position
- Not recognizing yourself in a mirror, but thinking it is another person, perhaps an intruder
- Thinking that a person on TV is in the room
- Misidentifying a relative as a different person
- Hallucinations, such as small animals, bugs, scenery or people
- Stress and frustration caused by these changes

What you can do

- Make sure: plenty of lighting, reduce glare. Have contrast so that you can see plate, toilet, etc.
- Reduce clutter.
- Do not change the furniture around if the person is used to it the way it is and may rely on their familiarity to navigate it.
- If there is an area that you don't want a person to go, e.g. a door, you can use patterns or other signals to conceal it – e.g. a large picture to hang on door.
- Approach the person from the front
- Reassure the person if they are upset by something they perceive.
- Use tools such as name tags if it is hard for the person to remember names or who people are.
- Tactfully give the person cues, such as reminding them how to use their utensils, or letting them know who has entered or left the room.
- If the person believes something that is not true, do not correct or criticize: “focus on the feelings, not the facts”
- Slow down – allow extra time

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Functional Information & Suggestions (continued)

Learn more:

- Reducing Dementia Risk: A Summary of the Science and Public Health Impact, Alzheimer's Association: <https://www.alz.org/media/Documents/compiled-evidence-based-reports.pdf>
- Dementia, Alzheimer's and Eyesight: Symptoms and how to help, Hebrew SeniorLife: <https://www.hebrewseniorlife.org/blog/dementia-alzheimers-and-eyesight-symptoms-and-how-help>
- A Form of Dementia that Affects Vision: Posterior Cortical Atrophy, BrightFocus: <https://www.brightfocus.org/alzheimers/article/form-dementia-affects-vision-posterior-cortical-atrophy>
- Tips for Caregivers on Reducing Visual Perception Difficulties in Individuals with Alzheimer's, by VisionAware

Tips for Caregivers on Reducing Visual Perception Difficulties in Individuals with Alzheimer's, by VisionAware: <https://visionaware.org/emotional-support/for-family-and-friends/guidance-for-caregivers-of-individuals-who-are-blind-or-visually-impaired/tips-for-caregivers-on-reducing-visuoperceptual-difficulties-in-individuals-with-alzheimers/>

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Please also see MCB/DDS Partnership "Focus" resources:

Aging and Vision:

<https://www.focusonvisionandvisionloss.org/eye-health--safety.html>

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"Focus"

A resource of the MCB/DDS Partnership Project
focusonvisionandvisionloss.org
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