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Brain drain

Dementia isn't all about memory loss. Speech, movement and behavioural problems can make it tough to manage. But early detection can help

Rhythmia Kaul

ROSHAN LAL Goyal, 56, considers himself lucky. After more than a year, he can now recognise his three-year-old granddaughter Tavishi. "I had developed stroke-acquired dementia. I could not recognise anyone, not even my family and friends, but medicines have helped me manage my forgetfulness," says Goyal, who runs a provision store in South Delhi.

"He could not remember the past 10 years of his life. Every time he saw us, he would address us by a different name," says son Pawan. "When he would go out, he would forget his way back home. So someone had to follow him all the time," adds Pawan.

Dementia is marked by progressive decline in brain function due to damage or disease. People lose their ability to solve problems and maintain emotional control, and some may even experience personality changes and report behavioural problems such as agitation, delusions, and hallucinations.

Besides, memory loss, the most common symptom, there are others as well. "If two or more brain functions — such as memory, language skills, perception or cognitive skills — are significantly impaired, a person is diagnosed with the disease," says Dr Puneet Aggarwal, consultant neurologist at Max Super Speciality Hospital in Saket. Dementia isn't curable but it can be controlled with medication, says Aggarwal.

But it's the family or care-giver who has



SONU MEHTA/HT

MOVING ON: Medication has helped Roshan Lal Goyal, seen here with wife Kiran, granddaughter Tavishi and son Pawan. It has slowed down his slide into forgetfulness. But there isn't much medical support for persons like him

a tough time. "My father became extremely difficult and would just not listen to anyone. When left on his own, he would disappear without informing. We couldn't risk leaving him alone anytime," says Atul Vinayak Singhal, son of 71-year-old retired engineer, P.P. Singhal, who was diagnosed with dementia earlier this year.

In India, there is no support mechanism for people with dementia, say experts. "It's a real problem. If a patient doesn't have family support, there is not much help available. Organisations like Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Society of India focus more on creating awareness," feels Dr Madhuri Behari, professor and head

of the department of neurology, AIIMS. Even old age homes do not have medical support to deal with such cases, she says.

Dementia can be triggered by clotting in the brain, hypothyroidism and vitamin B12 deficiency. "There has been an increase in the number of people being diagnosed with dementia cases, mostly because of early detection and increasing longevity," said Dr Aggarwal.

Staying physically fit and mentally agile helps to offset the symptoms. "Activity, both physical and mental, increases blood supply to the brain and slows decline in its functioning," says Dr Behari.

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Inside the skull: Losing gray matter

Normal

Dementia

What to watch out for

Forgetfulness: Problem recalling recent events; forgetting names; losing sense of direction.

Abnormality in speech: Problems in sentence construction and comprehension.

Decline in skilled motor activity: Unable to do simple tasks like brushing teeth.

Treatment

- Medicines such as donepezil, rivastigmin and galantamin help manage the disease. That could set a person back by around Rs 600 per month
- Identifying the problem early helps the doctor manage it better

Prevention

- Physical fitness and mental agility. High intake of vitamin A, C, E and B
- Control of risk factors like hypertension, cholesterol and diabetes etc