

Worksheet 15:

Assessment for dementia

There is no single test for dementia. A diagnosis is based on a combination of assessments and tests. These may be done by a GP or a specialist at a memory clinic or hospital.

Taking a history

The doctor will ask how and when symptoms started and whether they're affecting daily life. They will also check whether any existing conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, depression or stroke are being properly managed, and review any medication taken – including prescribed medicines, those bought over the counter from pharmacies, and any alternative products such as vitamin supplements.

Cognitive ability tests

People with symptoms of dementia are given tests to check their mental abilities, such as memory or thinking. These tests are known as cognitive assessments and may be done initially by a doctor. These tests assess a number of different cognitive abilities, including:

- short- and long-term memory
- concentration and attention span
- language and communication skills
- awareness of time and place (orientation)

Assessment of physical function

Blood tests will check:

- liver function
- kidney function
- thyroid function
- haemoglobin A1c (to check for diabetes)
- vitamin B12 and folate levels

If the doctor thinks the person may have an infection, they may also ask for a urine sample and other investigations.

Mental health assessment

To assess the person's mental health – could they be depressed? Have they lived with mental health needs all their life? Has the person experienced a significant life event recently – for example a bereavement or loss of some kind?

Brain scans

A computerised tomography (CT) scan uses X-rays and a computer to create detailed images of the inside of the body. A CT scan can be used to check for signs of stroke or a brain tumour.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a type of scan that uses strong magnetic fields and radio waves to produce detailed images of the inside of the body. An MRI scan helps confirm a diagnosis of dementia and the type of disease causing the dementia.

A PET scan (positron emission tomography) is used to produce detailed 3D images of the inside of the body. A PET scan may be recommended if the result of the MRI or CT scan is uncertain. PET scans look at how the brain functions and can pick up abnormalities with the blood flow in the brain.