

Dementia in Women

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KEYWORDS

- Dementia • Women • Caregiver burden • Alzheimer's dementia
- Women as caregivers

KEY POINTS

- Dementia is a growing problem in women worldwide, overall occurring more often in women than men.
- Considering specific types of dementia, Alzheimer disease occurs more often in women, whereas other less common dementias, such as vascular dementia, dementia of Lewy body type, and Parkinson disease dementia do not.
- Women may survive longer with Alzheimer dementia but may have a more rapid and severe course in the associated cognitive decline.
- Women are more likely to serve as a caregiver to someone with dementia, thus are at increased risk of caregiver stress.

Dementia is a significant health problem worldwide and it affects women disproportionately compared with men. This is both in the numbers of women diagnosed with dementia, as well as caregiver burden. Increasing knowledge of dementia in women is crucial for health care providers of all specialties to more appropriately meet this important health care need.

EPIDEMIOLOGY OF DEMENTIA

For both genders, the world population is becoming older. Internationally, by 2050, the world population of adults older than 60 is projected to increase by 1.25 billion.¹ This is true also for the United States, as according to the US Census Bureau the number of older adults (age 65 and older) is expected to increase from 43.1 to 83.7 million between 2012 and 2050.² As advancing age is a major risk factor for dementia, the prevalence of dementia is also increasing with the larger population of older adults. A 2013 meta-analysis estimated a doubling of the prevalence of dementia every 5 to 7 years.¹ Alzheimer's Disease International estimated that global numbers of those effected by dementia would rise from 44.35 million in 2013 to 135.46 million by 2050.³ In addition

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to the health burden of the rising prevalence of dementia, there is the related vast financial burden. The cost of dementia care around the world was estimated to be \$600 billion in 2010. Most costs were not related to medical expenses, but the expense of social and informal caregiving.⁴

Worldwide, women live longer than men, thus women are more likely to be affected by dementia. This is especially significant as women age, because the rate of dementia doubles every 5 years after the age of 65. In many parts of the world, including Europe, Latin America, Australia, and areas outside of the Pacific region of Asia, female gender independently predicted a higher prevalence of dementia by approximately 20%.¹ This same finding was not found by the investigators in North America or the Pacific region of Asia. In addition, women outnumber men, with 55% of adults older than 60 being women in 2007.⁵ The disproportionate numbers of women as compared with men continue to increase with age, especially in those older than 80, which is the age in which women are more likely to be affected by dementia.⁵ In addition, women outnumber men in both developed and undeveloped countries, so dementia in women is not an isolated problem to the developed world.⁵

Studies have shown that two-thirds of Americans suffering from dementia are women.⁶ Incidence studies are less clear, but do appear to show an increased incidence of dementia in women in the oldest old.⁵ Similarly, it has been noted that Alzheimer dementia disproportionately affects women in both prevalence and severity. Some studies have shown that at a similar stage of Alzheimer dementia, women have more pronounced cognitive deficits than men⁷; however, the underlying mechanisms for these differences are unknown.⁸

There is also some evidence that women live longer than men after the development of dementia. Helmer and colleagues⁹ found that regardless of the age of onset of Alzheimer dementia, survival was greater in women as compared with men. Although the investigators did not offer a theory about this phenomenon, they did note that this same finding has been demonstrated in other studies. The effect for longer survival in women showed a trend toward decreasing with advancing age.

Interestingly, women may be more concerned than men are about developing dementia and the potential consequences of developing aspects of this disease. Specifically, women were noted to have more fears about loss of independence, inability to help family members with their care needs, and forgetting important information, such as the identity of family members.¹⁰

There are many types of dementia that although sharing deficits in memory, cognition, and function, have very different etiologies and life course. Much of the research in the different dementias has not examined or reported on differences between genders or specifically studying women. The following assumes some knowledge of dementia disorders and is not meant to be an overview of the disorders, but rather a focus on what is known of gender differences in these disorders.

Alzheimer Disease

Alzheimer disease or Alzheimer dementia has a greater incidence and is more prevalent in women as compared with men.¹¹ This is especially true for the oldest old, with rates increasing disproportionately among the sexes at older ages.¹² In one study, the cumulative risk that someone would have dementia at the age of 95, if he or she lived that long, was calculated. The cumulative risk for a woman at the age of 65 to develop Alzheimer dementia at the age of 95 was found to be 0.22 as compared with 0.09 for men.¹³ There are also differences in the clinical course of Alzheimer disease by gender. Men have been shown to have a higher mortality rate and a greater number

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