



Perceptions of Dementia

A new survey by the Dementia: Understand Together campaign has found improving public perceptions and attitudes towards people with dementia since the last time similar questions were asked.

The focus of the survey reflects an ongoing commitment by the Dementia: Understand Together campaign, which is led by the HSE in partnership with The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Age Friendly Ireland, Age and Opportunity, and the Dementia Services Information and Development Centre, to help create communities that actively embrace and include those living with dementia and their families.

There are many forms of dementia – the four most common being Alzheimer’s disease, vascular dementia, mixed Alzheimer’s Disease and vascular dementia, and Lewy body disease – and approximately 64,000 people live with dementia in Ireland today. This number is expected to more than double to over 150,000 by 2045.

The nationally representative survey of over 1,200 people undertaken by Behaviour & Attitudes in July of this year found:

- **Welcoming society:** when asked about the attitudes of others, 67% of respondents believe most people would accept a person with dementia as a close friend and a similar number (68%) believe most would treat a person with dementia as they would anyone. Both of these results are up from 56% in 2016, showing a significant positive shift in public inclusivity and empathy towards people with dementia
- **Good company:** seven in ten (71%) people are happy to spend time with a person with dementia, up from 66% in 2018, and a similar number (72%) are happy to be in a social group in the company of a person with dementia, up from 68% in 2018. When asked if they wouldn’t bother to visit a person with dementia because “they won’t remember” three in four people (76%) rejected this, up from 73% in 2018

- **Active citizens:** in a new survey question asked in 2021, more than nine in ten who responded (92%) believe that people with dementia have the right to be active citizens in their communities
- **Businesses:** in another question not previously asked, more than eight in ten (81%) believe that there are things businesses and service providers can do to make their services accessible to people with dementia
- **Circle of friends:** demonstrating how dementia touches the lives of so many people, almost half of those surveyed (48%) said that they know (or have known) at least one person with dementia, up from 44% in 2018
- **Understanding:** a third of adults (33%) feel that they have a reasonable understanding of dementia while almost nine in ten adults (88%) know something about dementia – just 12% say they know nothing at all. These figures have remained consistent with those reported in the previous survey in 2018, notwithstanding the public discourse being understandably dominated by information on COVID-19 over the past 18 months
- **Early diagnosis:** more than nine in ten (91%) agreed that getting diagnosed at an early stage is good because it allows the person more of an opportunity to make decisions about their care – up from 78% in 2018
- **Seeking attention:** a further additional question for 2021 found that almost six in ten (58%) would react immediately if they felt they were becoming forgetful and were concerned that it might be a sign of

early dementia. Three in ten (31%) would probably delay a couple of months and “keep checking myself”. One in ten (9%) say they would be anxious about such a diagnosis and would probably try and cover it up for a while.

For Professor Suzanne Timmons, Consultant Geriatrician and Clinical Lead of the HSE’s National Dementia Office, it is important that we convert our understanding of the importance of early diagnosis into seeking support.

“An interesting finding from the survey is that most of us agree that early diagnosis is good in principle but that, if push comes to shove, a significant number of us would delay seeking help,” she says.

“It is a very positive indicator that people understand that early diagnosis is a good thing, but equally it is important that people understand the benefits of seeking support in a timely way. It may not be dementia in the end, but the assessment may indicate certain risk factors for future dementia that could be tackled now. In the event that it is dementia, for many people, there are medications and cognitive therapies that aim to support the person to carry on their normal daily life despite the dementia. For everyone, getting a diagnosis enables us to make decisions about our future, and it means we can get the right information, advice and support at the right time. All of this gives us the best chance for having the best possible quality of life, regardless of the diagnosis.”

Community Supports

For more information on dementia, including details of local services and HSE Memory Technology Resource Rooms in each county, visit www.understandtogether.ie. Members of the public can also contact The Alzheimer Society of Ireland Helpline for support and details of their local Dementia Adviser on Freephone 1800 341 341 (Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm, Saturday 10am to 4pm).