

# Alzheimer's disease:

## Understanding your diagnosis





# About this booklet

**If you have recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, this booklet is for you. It will help you, and your family and friends, to understand more about the condition and how it can affect you. It covers some of the feelings you might have and suggests ways of staying positive.**

It covers feelings you might have, suggests ways of staying positive, and explains the treatments, support and services that are available.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. You are not alone – around 850,000 people in the UK have dementia. The majority – more than 520,000 – have Alzheimer's disease. It is possible to live well with the condition. Support is available for you and your family.

This booklet also tells you about other Alzheimer's Society publications that can give you more information on particular topics.



**These can be accessed at  
[alzheimers.org.uk/publications](https://alzheimers.org.uk/publications)**



**You can also call 0300 303 5933  
to order publications.**



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# 1

## Coping with your diagnosis

It can be difficult to come to terms with a diagnosis of dementia, but there is support available and things you can do to help make it easier.

When you find out you have Alzheimer's disease, you may feel a range of emotions. Give yourself time to think things through.

Remember that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel. However you feel, it is right for you, at this moment. And don't worry if it all seems to be overwhelming at first. There are good and bad times, and with support many people come to terms with their diagnosis.

It may help to talk things over with friends and family, or with a health or social care professional who understands dementia.

Things you should try to think about after a diagnosis include:

- emotions and relationships
- treatments and ways to stay active and healthy
- financial matters and planning ahead
- your job – if you're still working
- driving – if you drive
- practical and emotional support – from the NHS, social services, private companies or voluntary organisations.

You won't need to think about all these things straightaway, so take things at your own pace.

## Managing your feelings

You may have a number of different feelings after a diagnosis. This is normal and there are ways to cope with them.

- Many people feel a sense of sadness or loss after their diagnosis. You may feel that you will no longer be able to do the things that you enjoy or that you had planned. It is true that having dementia may mean you need to make changes. But with the right information and support you can carry on with regular aspects of your life for some time.
- Shock, disbelief and denial are all common reactions to a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Sometimes this can be a good thing. It can give you the time you need to deal with your diagnosis.
- Fear is another very common reaction. You may be afraid of the future, of losing control or of becoming a burden to your family. Talking about this with others can help. It is important not to feel that you are on your own.
- Some people worry that they did something wrong to get Alzheimer's disease, or did not do enough to prevent it. In many cases it is not known why dementia develops. Don't dwell on this. Instead try to keep going with a positive outlook.
- A few people feel relief after a diagnosis. This may sound strange, but it can be better to have an explanation for the changes you have been experiencing, rather than worry about what else it could be. Once you have a diagnosis, you can deal with it and do something about it.



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After a diagnosis, you may want to talk things over with other people. You might only want to do this with your partner, or with close family and friends. You may not want to talk about it at all.

Talking to others with a similar experience can help as well. You could try:

- finding a support group where you can talk to others with a similar experience (see 'Services and support' on page 35)
- joining an online community (for example, Alzheimer's Society's Talking Point)
- talking with a dementia support worker or dementia adviser
- seeing a qualified counsellor or psychotherapist.

## Changes to relationships

Dementia can change your relationships with people. You and the people close to you will have to adapt to new challenges. It's important to be aware of this, talk about it as openly as you can, and look for solutions together.

Those close to you will need to offer you more support in daily life. In time they may become your 'carer'.



**People who support you may wish to look at factsheet 401, What is Alzheimer's disease?**

## Telling children

If you have young children or grandchildren, it is a good idea to tell them about your dementia. Do this in a way that feels right for their age and ability to understand things. You might be surprised at how adaptable they are.



**For more information on how dementia can affect your relationships with others see booklet 1507, Your relationships.**

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**'It's important to remember that no two cases of dementia are the same, and just because someone who has been diagnosed is experiencing a certain set of symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you will go on to develop those same symptoms.'**

Carer for a person with dementia





# 2

## What causes dementia?

Dementia is not a natural part of ageing. It is the name for a group of symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by a disease.

Dementia is the name for a group of symptoms that may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, planning, problem-solving, perception or language. They are severe enough to interfere with daily life. Some people may also experience changes in mood or behaviour.

There are many causes of dementia. The most common are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Some people have a combination of these, known as mixed dementia.

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## What is Alzheimer's disease?

This type of dementia is named after Alois Alzheimer, the German doctor who first described it. In Alzheimer's disease, abnormal structures called tangles form inside brain cells and plaques form outside them. They disrupt the way the brain works and cause brain cells to die.



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## How does Alzheimer's disease affect people?

Alzheimer's disease affects everyone differently. However, some common symptoms are described in this section. You might recognise some of your own experiences here.

## Early changes

The earliest symptoms of Alzheimer's disease can be mild, but they gradually get worse. For most people, the earliest symptoms are memory problems. You may:

- lose items around the house, such as keys or glasses
- struggle to find the right word in a conversation
- forget about recent events
- get lost in a familiar place
- forget appointments.

Other early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease can include difficulties with:

- language – struggling to follow a conversation or repeating things
- planning and organising
- judging distances (such as when using stairs) and seeing objects in three dimensions (such as when picking things up).
- orientation – becoming confused or losing track of the day or date.

You may also feel anxious or irritable, or become depressed or withdrawn. Treatments for these symptoms are covered later in this booklet.

## Later stages

Alzheimer's disease is progressive. This means that your symptoms will become worse over several years and you will need increasing amounts of help.

Everyone is different but, as the condition progresses, symptoms can include:

- memory problems becoming worse – forgetting events, names and faces
- becoming more confused about the time and place
- having more severe problems with communication and speech
- delusions (thinking things that are not true) and visual hallucinations (seeing things that are not there)
- changes in behaviour – for example, asking the same questions over again or getting agitated
- walking more slowly and less steadily
- losing weight and having difficulties with swallowing or eating.

In the later stages of Alzheimer's disease, someone will generally need full-time care and support. This may be distressing to think about, but it can help to be prepared.





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## Treatments

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, but in this section we explain some of the treatments that can help you to live well.

Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, it is possible to live well with the condition, with the right support. You will probably be offered certain drugs, as explained on the following pages.

Non-drug approaches are also important. Ask your GP or memory service for details of what non-drug treatments and activities are available in your local area. Also see the section on Alzheimer's Society services on page 43.

## Drug treatments

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There are drugs that can help with some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease (or mixed dementia in which Alzheimer's is the main cause). They don't cure the disease and do not work for everyone, but they are usually worth trying.

In the early and middle stages of Alzheimer's disease you will usually be prescribed a drug called donepezil, or a related drug. It may help with concentration, memory and motivation. It can make day-to-day living easier.

Someone in the middle or later stages of Alzheimer's disease may be offered a different drug called memantine. This may help with mental abilities and daily living. Memantine may also help with changes in behaviour such as agitation or delusions.

If you are diagnosed with depression or anxiety, your doctor may suggest drugs for these. These may be combined with talking therapies (for more information see page 22).



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## Other treatments

You will benefit from staying active, doing things you enjoy and keeping in touch with people. Some other ideas for non-drug treatments and activities are given on the next pages.

- **Talking therapies**, such as counselling, might help you to come to terms with your diagnosis. Another talking treatment, **cognitive behavioural therapy**, may help with depression or anxiety. Your doctor may suggest you have cognitive behavioural therapy and take medication at the same time.
- **Cognitive stimulation therapy** is done in small groups and involves a number of sessions that are usually weekly. These may involve activities such as games, songs and talking about current affairs. People find this helps memory and communication.
- **Life story work** is an activity for you and a friend or family member, or professional providing care or support. You make a record of experiences, people and/or places in your life. This may be an enjoyable way of helping with memory problems. It can also help any professional carers who support you to understand you better.
- **Reminiscence** involves talking about a theme from your past such as schooldays, holidays or simply daily life. Reminiscence often includes prompts such as photos and objects from that time. It could help your mood as well as your memory.

- **Cognitive rehabilitation** is a type of therapy that allows you to set your own practical goals (for example, handling money confidently or learning to use a mobile phone). You then work with a therapist (for example, a psychologist or occupational therapist) to achieve these.

**'The most important advice I can give you is to keep contact with whatever family and friends you have already and try to make new ones through whatever associations there are locally. Other people who have already been through the experience invariably have something useful to offer.'**

Wife of a person with dementia





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## Living well

Living with dementia is challenging. You may feel angry or frustrated at times. Your plans for the future might change, but dementia doesn't change who you are. There are some practical things that can help you live as well as possible.

## Coping with memory loss

There are lots of things you might try to help with memory loss:

- Use a large diary to write down things you want to remember.
- Place useful telephone numbers by the phone.
- Put a note on the door to remind yourself to lock up at night.
- Ask your pharmacist about putting your pills in a dosette box.
- Consider whether any gadgets or pieces of technology might work for you.

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## Keeping active

Keeping as active as possible – physically, mentally and socially – will help you to stay as healthy and independent as possible.

As long as you feel safe, you can still do the things that you've always done. Try to keep up with your hobbies. You may need to change the way you do things, or have some support.



**For more information see booklet 1506, Keeping active and involved.**

## Staying healthy

Having Alzheimer's disease doesn't mean you should feel ill. See the doctor if you're feeling unwell, or if someone that you trust suggests you should. If you have other medical conditions (such as high blood pressure, diabetes or heart problems), it is particularly important to have regular check-ups for these.

You might find the following tips useful:

- Try to eat balanced meals and drink plenty of fluids.
- Take regular physical exercise.
- If you smoke, consider stopping.
- Take your medications and tell your doctor about any side effects.
- If you find yourself regularly feeling low, anxious or irritable, see your GP.
- If you are in pain, it is important to tell your doctor or carer.
- Keep up to date with your vaccinations.
- Have regular check-ups for your eyesight, hearing, teeth and foot care.

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## Planning ahead

As Alzheimer's disease progresses, it will become harder for you to make decisions about your health, care and finances. If you're able to, try to think about your future, talk to others and plan ahead as soon as you can.

## Advance care planning

You can make decisions now so that your future care and finances are handled in a way that reflects your wishes – this is called 'advance care planning'. It can help you to worry less, knowing that you have some control over future events.

Advance care planning can be done in a number of ways:

- Lasting power of attorney
- an advance statement – where you write down how you would like to be cared for
- an advance decision to refuse treatment – where you create a legal document to refuse certain medical treatments (for example, resuscitation) in the future
- a 'do not resuscitate' order – a decision not to have your heart or breathing restarted if they stop.

Talking about care at the end of life can be difficult for you and your family. You shouldn't feel under any pressure to have these discussions. But if you're thinking about advance care planning, it is important to do it while you can.



**For more information see factsheet 463, Advance decisions and advance statements. In Northern Ireland see factsheet NI467, Financial and legal tips.**

## Lasting power of attorney

Many people with dementia choose to give someone they trust 'power of attorney'. This person – the 'attorney' – will make certain decisions for you if you lose the ability to do this.

The legal document used to give someone this power is called a 'Lasting power of attorney' (LPA). There are two types:

- LPA for health and welfare – for things like medical treatment or where you will live.
- LPA for property and affairs – for things like accessing bank accounts, paying bills or selling your house.



**For more information see factsheet 472, Lasting power of attorney.**

If you live in Northern Ireland you will need to make an 'Enduring power of attorney' (EPA). Talk to a solicitor or Citizens Advice.



**For more information see factsheet NI472, Enduring power of attorney and controllership.**



## Financial matters

It's important to have a safe place to keep all your essential documents – for example, bank and pension details and your will. Tell someone that you trust where this place is.

Talk to your bank about what they can do to help you manage your money.

## Benefits

You and your carer may be entitled to a range of benefits. Accessing them can seem complicated but help is available. Ask a social worker, a local welfare rights service, Citizens Advice or Age UK about a full benefits check.

## Wills

Everyone should make a will. Talk to a solicitor about this. Alzheimer's Society can put you in touch with an approved solicitor through our Will to Remember scheme. See [alzheimers.org.uk/willtoremember](https://alzheimers.org.uk/willtoremember) for details.

## Driving

When you're diagnosed with dementia it doesn't necessarily mean you have to stop driving straightaway. But by law you must tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Great Britain or Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) in Northern Ireland promptly that you have dementia. You must also tell your car insurance company.

## Working

If you're working, you might want to carry on, or you may feel that reducing your hours or stopping work is the best option for you. You might consider volunteering. This would be a way of still taking part in meaningful activity but on a more flexible basis.

If you're experiencing difficulties at work, talk to your employer or get advice. Try your human resources department, trade union, Citizens Advice or your local Jobcentre Plus office.

Once your employer knows you have dementia, they must try to make 'reasonable adjustments' so you can keep working, if you're able to. The government can provide financial support to help you stay in work through their Access to Work grants. If you decide to stop working or retire early, seek advice from an independent financial adviser about your pension rights.

**'To begin with we told nobody. I think we needed time to get used to the diagnosis ourselves. I then told close family as they were the ones who were most likely to see the changes. Gradually I told close friends. Many years down the line I now tell everyone. Everyone is different and it will depend on how your partner feels.'**

Wife of a person with dementia





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## Services and support

Asking for help can feel difficult, especially if you've always been independent. You might not feel you need it straightaway, but it can be useful to know that a wide range of information and support is available for you and the people who are important to you.

There is lots of support available following a diagnosis of dementia. This includes help from:

- **The NHS** – your GP, psychiatrist, neurologist, community nurse, dietitian, occupational therapist or psychologist can help you with a number of health problems.
- **Social services** – a social worker from the local council can work with you to see what care and support is needed. Ask your GP, or look up 'social services' in the phone book or online and ask for a needs assessment (also called a 'community care assessment' in Wales and Northern Ireland).
- **Charities and not-for-profit organisations** – these can be a good source of local support, advice and information. National organisations include Alzheimer's Society, Dementia UK and Age UK. Ask about age-appropriate services if you would prefer to spend time with people closer to your own age.
- **Private companies** – these include agencies that can provide care and support services at home and which you may have to pay for. Professional care workers could help you with cooking, dressing, medication or going to work. Ask your local social services or contact the UK Homecare Association to see what is available in your area.

## Health and social care professionals

As you come to need more care, many different professionals are likely to be involved. These include doctors, other health professionals, and social care professionals.

### Doctors

Your GP can support you in many different ways, including talking to you about your symptoms and medical problems (not just dementia). They can carry out physical examinations, arrange further tests with a consultant or hospital specialist, and review whether your drugs are working.

You may also interact with a number of consultants. These might include a psychiatrist, who can help with dementia and other mental health problems like depression and anxiety, and a neurologist, who specialises in the brain and nervous system.

### Other health professionals

Nurses are also likely to care for you, and the people who support you, in a number of ways. These might include community nurses (including community mental health nurses known as CPNs) who can provide support at home, and Admiral Nurses who specialise in dementia care, especially supporting carers.

### Social care professionals

Social workers and social care workers can help you in non-medical ways. Social workers assess your needs and advise on the best support for you. Social care workers help with practical things like washing, dressing and eating.



**For more information see booklet 1503, Health and social care professionals.**



**For advice and support call the National Dementia Helpline on 0300 222 1122**



**For more information visit [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)**

You can get support from other health professionals to help with many different issues:

Issues	Who can help?
Communication, eating, drinking and swallowing	<b>Speech and language therapist</b>
Maintaining skills and independence	<b>Occupational therapist</b>
Exercising and moving around	<b>Physiotherapist</b>
Caring for your feet	<b>Chiropodist</b>
Eyesight	<b>Optometrist</b>
Hearing	<b>Audiologist</b>
Behaviours, anxiety and restlessness	<b>Music therapist, clinical psychologist</b>
Relationship and emotional issues	<b>Counsellor or clinical psychologist</b>
Nutrition	<b>Dietitian</b>
Toilet problems	<b>Continence adviser</b>

## Support from other people living with dementia

Support from other people living with dementia, especially those who also have Alzheimer's disease, may be important to you. You may be younger than many people with more common types of dementia. You may feel no one else understands your condition.

There are different groups and activities for people living with dementia, though they may not all be available in the area where you live. Different groups and activities include:

- **Support groups** – for people with dementia to talk about their experiences and learn from each other.
- **Activity groups** – for people with dementia to come together regularly and take part in different activities, such as singing (see Alzheimer's Society services on page 43).
- **Dementia cafés** – a safe, comfortable and supportive environment for people with dementia and their carers to socialise.
- **Talking Point** – an online community for people living with dementia and for carers.  
Visit [alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint](https://alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint)



To find services in your area, visit [alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect](https://alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect)



For advice and support call the National Dementia Helpline on **0300 222 1122**

## Paying for social care and support

Many people with dementia will reach a stage when they need professional care and support at home to help them live well with the condition. Friends and family who care for a person with dementia may also need support to carry out this role.

Some people with dementia and their carers will be entitled (often called 'eligible') to support with all or some of the costs of this care. They must meet certain criteria to be eligible.

### England

In England, a local authority has a duty to carry out a 'care needs assessment' for anyone with dementia. The assessment is to determine what care needs you have and whether the local authority will contribute towards meeting them.

### Wales

In Wales, a local authority has a duty to carry out a 'community care assessment' for anyone with dementia who may require community care. They also have a duty to provide services directly or – more often – make arrangements to meet any needs for which someone is eligible.

### Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the local health and social care (HSC) trusts have a duty to carry out a 'community care assessment' for anyone with dementia who may be in need of support.

Carer's assessments are also available so that the person who is caring for you can receive support to help them with their caring role.



**For more information, see factsheets 418, Assessment for care and support in England, W418, Assessment for care and support in Wales, or NI418, Community care assessment, for those in Northern Ireland.**

## Support in the later stages of dementia

Most people with dementia are likely to reach a stage where they need more support. It can be useful to plan ahead for this.

Many people go into a care home or supported living as their dementia progresses. A professional such as a doctor or social worker, your local Alzheimer's Society or another voluntary sector organisation may be able to give advice on housing options, including choosing a care home. At this point, it is likely that someone caring for or supporting you will need to arrange this. It may be helpful to plan ahead for this as early as possible.

You can search for local services at [alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect](https://alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect)



# Alzheimer's Society services

**Alzheimer's Society provides a range of services and resources to support people affected by dementia.**

## National information and support services

These are available wherever you live in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### National Dementia Helpline – 0300 222 1122

The Helpline is for anyone who is affected by dementia or worried about their memory. Trained advisers provide information, support, guidance and signposting to other appropriate organisations. The Helpline is open 9am–8pm Monday–Wednesday, 9am–5pm Thursday and Friday, and 10am–4pm Saturday and Sunday. You can also contact the Helpline by email at [helpline@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:helpline@alzheimers.org.uk)

### Talking Point online community

Talking Point is an online community for anyone affected by dementia. It's a place to ask for advice, share information, join in discussions and feel supported. Talking Point is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Visit [alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint](https://alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint)

### Dementia Connect Online Directory

The Dementia Connect Online Directory is our comprehensive, easy to use online support services directory for anyone affected by dementia in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Through a simple postcode or place name search, you can find services that are close and relevant to you. Visit [alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect](https://alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect)

## Information

Alzheimer's Society produces a wide range of information for people with dementia, carers, family and friends.

This includes the factsheets and booklets listed in this guide. You can read this information at [alzheimers.org.uk/publications](https://alzheimers.org.uk/publications)

To request printed copies, go to the order form on our website or phone **0300 303 5933**.

You can also view Alzheimer's Society videos for more information, as well as stories from people affected by dementia. Visit [www.youtube.com/alzheimerssociety](https://www.youtube.com/alzheimerssociety)

## LPA digital assistance service

Alzheimer's Society offers a Lasting power of attorney digital assistance service to help people with dementia create and register LPAs online. If you don't have access to the internet, or are not confident using a computer and have no one who can help, we will complete the forms on your behalf. Call the Alzheimer's Society **National Dementia Helpline** on **0300 222 1122**.

## Local services

Alzheimer's Society provides a range of local services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These include dementia advisers and dementia support workers, and Side by Side volunteers who support people with dementia to keep doing the things they enjoy.

The services that are available can vary from place to place. Contact your local Alzheimer's Society office or the National Dementia Helpline for more information about Society services in your area or visit [alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect](https://alzheimers.org.uk/dementiaconnect)



# Other useful organisations

## Age UK

0800 055 6112 (advice line, 8am–7pm)

0800 169 8787 (general enquiries)

[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

## Age Cymru (in Wales)

0800 223 444 (advice line, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

029 2043 1555 (general enquiries)

[www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru)

## Age NI (in Northern Ireland)

0808 808 7575 (advice and information)

028 9024 5729 (general enquiries)

[www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland)

Provides information and advice for older people.

## Citizens Advice

Various locations

[www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

Citizens Advice provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities.

## Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project (DEEP)

[www.dementiavoices.org.uk](http://www.dementiavoices.org.uk)

Brings together groups of people with dementia from across the UK. DEEP supports these groups to try to change services and policies that affect the lives of people with dementia.

## GOV.UK

[www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

The website for finding information and services from the UK government, including information about benefits.

## NHS Choices

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

The UK's biggest health website. Provides a comprehensive health information service that aims to put people in control of their healthcare.

## Office of the Public Guardian

0300 456 0300

[www.publicguardian.gov.uk](http://www.publicguardian.gov.uk)

The OPG supports and promotes decision-making for those who lack capacity or would like to plan for their future within the framework of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.





This booklet has been reviewed by people living with dementia.

It can be downloaded from our website at [alzheimers.org.uk/publications](https://alzheimers.org.uk/publications)

To give feedback on this booklet, or for a list of sources, please contact [publications@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:publications@alzheimers.org.uk)

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**Alzheimer's Society is the UK's leading dementia charity. We provide information and support, improve care, fund research, and create lasting change for people affected by dementia.**

If you have any concerns about Alzheimer's disease or any other form of dementia, visit **[alzheimers.org.uk](https://alzheimers.org.uk)** or call the **Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline** on **0300 222 1122**. (Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be recorded or monitored for training and evaluation purposes.)

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Code 616

