OBJECTIVE: The suitability of the SIDAM (Structured Interview for the Diagnosis of Dementia) for the detection of pre-clinical stages of dementia. METHODS: Prospective study of a sample of 794 non-demented elderly persons in the age bracket from 65 to 85 who were initially being treated in general hospitals. A cognitive screening with the SIDAM was performed during their stay in the hospital. After discharge the occurrence of dementia was determined in four follow-up studies at one-year intervals. RESULTS: During the follow-up, 100 newly developed cases of dementia were diagnosed. A lower performance in the SIDAM was associated with a significantly higher risk of the development of dementia. In comparison with the upper quartile in total SIDAM score the relative risk of a dementia amounted to 2.6 (1.0-6.8) for the second quartile, 4.5 (1.9-11.0) for the third quartile and 13.3 (5.7-31.1) for the fourth quartile. The highest predictive validity was found for memory performance, in particular for free delayed recall. CONCLUSIONS: Risk groups for dementia can be identified by the use of a brief cognitive screening procedure.