

AgePage

Forgetfulness: Knowing When to Ask for Help

Maria has been a teacher for 35 years. Recently, she has begun to forget details and has become more and more disorganized. At first, she laughed it off, but her memory problems have worsened. Her family and friends have been sympathetic but are not sure what to do. Parents and colleagues are worried about Maria's performance in the classroom. The principal suggested she see a doctor. Maria wonders if these problems are signs of Alzheimer's disease or just forgetfulness that comes with getting older.

Many people worry about becoming forgetful. They think forgetfulness is the first sign of Alzheimer's disease. Scientists have learned a lot about memory and why some kinds of memory problems are serious while others are not.

Age-Related Memory Changes

Forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging. As people get older, changes occur in all parts of the body, including the brain. As a result, some people may notice that it takes longer to learn new things, they don't remember information as well as they did, or they misplace things such as their eye glasses. These usually are signs of mild forgetfulness rather than serious memory problems.

Some older adults also find that they don't do as well as younger people on complex memory or learning tests. Yet, scientists have found that healthy older adults often do just as well as younger adults on these tests when given

enough time to complete them. In fact, as they age, healthy adults usually improve in areas of mental ability such as vocabulary.

Other Causes of Memory Loss

Some memory problems are related to health issues that may be treatable. For example, medication side effects; vitamin B12 deficiency; chronic alcoholism; and tumors, infections, or blood clots in the brain can cause memory loss or possibly dementia. Some thyroid, kidney, or liver disorders also can lead to memory loss. A doctor should treat these and other types of serious medical conditions as soon as possible.

Emotional problems, such as stress, anxiety, or depression, can make a person more forgetful and can be mistaken for dementia. For example, someone who has recently retired or who is coping with the death of a spouse, relative, or friend may feel sad, lonely, worried, or bored. Trying to deal with these life changes leaves some people confused or forgetful.

Confusion and forgetfulness caused by emotions usually are temporary and go away as the feelings fade. If you struggle with ongoing feelings of forgetfulness or confusion while grieving, it is important to get help from a doctor or counselor. Treatment may require counseling, medication, or both.

More Serious Memory Problems

For some older adults, memory problems can be a sign of mild cognitive impairment, or Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.

If you are worried about memory problems, see your primary care provider. Your provider may refer you to a neurologist — a physician who specializes in problems related to the brain and central nervous system.

Your provider will review your medical and family history and any prescription or over-the-counter medicines you take. You may also need to do a physical exam and neurological tests to assess memory, balance, language, and other

cognitive functions. Blood tests, urine tests, and brain scans can also help find or rule out possible causes of the memory problems. In addition to talking with you, your provider might ask a family member, caregiver, or close friend for information.

Mild Cognitive Impairment. Some people with memory problems have a condition called mild cognitive impairment (MCI). People with this condition have more cognitive problems (the ability to clearly think, learn, and remember) than normal for people their age. Their symptoms are not as severe as those of people with Alzheimer's disease, and people with MCI are able to carry out their normal daily activities.

Signs of MCI include:

- Losing things often
- Forgetting to go to important events or appointments
- Having more trouble coming up with words than other people of the same age

Family and friends may notice memory lapses, and the person with MCI may worry about losing his or her memory. These worries may prompt the person to see a doctor for diagnosis.

There is no standard treatment or approved medication for MCI, but there may be habits and behaviors you can change and activities you can do to help maintain your memory and thinking skills. If you have MCI, visit your health care provider every six to 12 months to track changes in memory and other thinking skills over time. MCI may be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, but not everyone with MCI develops Alzheimer's.

Dementia. Dementia is the loss of thinking, memory, reasoning skills, and behavioral abilities to such an extent that these symptoms interfere with a person's daily life and activities. Dementia is not a disease itself, but a group of symptoms caused by certain diseases or conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. Dementia is not a normal part of aging.

Tips for Dealing With Forgetfulness

People with some forgetfulness can use a variety of techniques that may help them stay healthy and deal with changes in their thinking.

- Plan tasks, make "to do" lists, and use memory aids like notes and calendars. Some people find they remember things better if they mentally connect them to a familiar name, song, book, or TV show.
- Keep up interests or hobbies, and develop new ones, such as volunteering and visiting with family and friends.
- Prevent or control high blood pressure. To control or lower high blood pressure, your health care provider may suggest exercise, changes in your diet, and/or medications. These steps can help protect your brain and your heart.
- Engage in physical activity and exercise. Several studies have associated aerobic exercise (such as brisk walking) with better brain function, although more research is needed to say for certain whether exercise can help prevent or delay dementia. Exercise may also help relieve feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression.
- Eat healthy foods. A healthy diet can help reduce the risk of many chronic diseases and may also help keep your brain healthy.
- Limit alcohol use. Heavy or binge drinking over time can cause memory loss and permanent brain damage.
- Get enough sleep, generally seven to eight hours each night.

Symptoms of dementia may include:

- Being unable to remember things
- Asking the same question or repeating the same story over and over
- Becoming lost in familiar places
- Having trouble following directions
- Getting confused about time, people, and places
- Having trouble handling money and paying bills
- Experiencing increased anxiety and/or aggression

Two of the most common causes of dementia in older adults are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. There are currently no medicines that can stop the progression of these conditions or prevent someone from getting them.

In Alzheimer's disease, changes in certain parts of the brain result in the death of many nerve cells. Symptoms of Alzheimer's begin slowly and worsen steadily as damage to nerve cells spreads throughout the brain. As time goes by, forgetfulness gives way to serious problems with memory, judgment, recognizing family and friends, and the ability to perform daily activities. Eventually, the person needs fulltime care.

In vascular dementia, injuries to the vessels supplying blood to the brain lead to the death of brain tissue, often after a stroke or series of strokes. Symptoms of vascular dementia can vary but usually begin suddenly, depending on the location and severity of a stroke. The person's memory, language, reasoning, and coordination may be affected. Mood and personality changes are common as well.

Some people have both Alzheimer's and vascular dementia, a condition known as mixed dementia. Other types of dementia include Lewy body dementia and frontotemporal disorders. More information can be found at www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-dementia-symptoms-types-and-diagnosis.

Treatment for Dementia

A person with dementia should be under a doctor's care. The doctor might be a primary care physician, neurologist, internist, geriatrician, or psychiatrist. The doctor can help treat the patient's physical and behavioral problems (such as agitation or wandering) and answer any questions that the person or family may have.

There currently are several medications approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that may, for some people, help slow down certain dementia symptoms such as memory loss and behavioral problems. They may enable the person to remain independent for longer. However, none of these drugs can prevent or stop the progression of Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.

Beware of unproven treatments, such as those labeled as dietary supplements, that promise to improve memory or prevent dementia. Talk with your doctor before you take any new product.

Researchers are investigating medications and other interventions to prevent or delay Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

People with vascular dementia should take steps to prevent further strokes. These include:

- Controlling high blood pressure
- Monitoring and treating high cholesterol and diabetes
- Not smoking

Family members and friends can help people in the early stages of dementia continue their daily routines, physical activities, and social contacts. People with dementia should be kept up to date about the details of their lives, the time of day, where they live, and what is happening at home and beyond. Memory aids such as a calendar, a list of daily plans, or setting reminders on a smartphone or other device may help.

When to Visit the Doctor for Memory Loss

If you, a family member, or a friend has problems remembering recent events or thinking clearly, or has concerns about memory, talk with a doctor. Finding the cause of the problem is important for determining the best course of action. Health care professionals who specialize in Alzheimer's disease and other dementias can recommend ways to manage the problem and suggest treatments and services that may help.

You also might want to consider participating in clinical trials or studies. Clinical trials are research studies that help test if a treatment, like a new drug, is safe and effective in people. People with and without memory problems can take part in clinical trials, which may help themselves, their families, or future generations.

To find out more about participating in clinical trials, call the Alzheimer's and Related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center toll-free at 800-438-4380 or visit www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/clinical-trials.

For More Information About Forgetfulness

Alzheimer's and Related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

800-438-4380 (toll-free)

adear@nia.nih.gov

www.alzheimers.gov

The National Institute on Aging's ADEAR Center offers information and publications in English and Spanish for families, caregivers, and professionals on diagnosis, treatment, patient care, caregiver needs, long-term care, education and training, and research related to Alzheimer's and related dementias.

Alzheimer's Association

800-272-3900 (toll-free)

866-403-3073 (TTY/toll-free)

info@alz.org

www.alz.org

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

866-232-8484 (toll-free)

info@alzfdn.org

www.alzfdn.org

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116 (toll-free)

eldercarelocator@n4a.org

www.eldercare.acl.gov

National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus

www.medlineplus.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



National Institute
on Aging

NIH...Turning Discovery Into Health® December 2020