Understanding Memory Loss

What To Do When You Have Trouble Remembering

From the National Institute on Aging

Table of Contents

Use the Table of Contents to help you find things quickly. Also, we put some medical terms in bold, such as **brain scan**. You can find out how to say these words and what they mean in the "Words to Know" section on page 21.

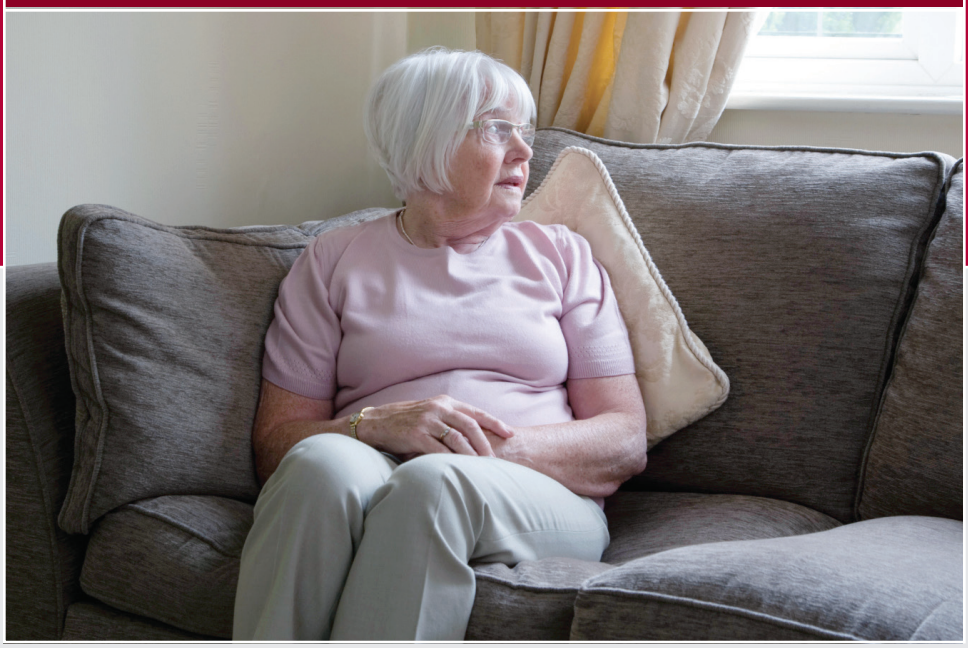
What's Inside?

We've all forgotten a name, where we put our keys, or if we locked the front door. It's normal to forget things once in a while. However, forgetting how to use the phone, not knowing how to find your way home, or missing more than one monthly payment may be signs of a more serious memory problem.

This booklet will help you learn about:

- The difference between mild forgetfulness and more serious memory problems
- Causes of memory problems and how to manage memory changes
- How to cope with serious memory problems

Mary's Story



Mary couldn't find her car keys. She looked on the hook just inside the front door. They weren't there. She searched in her purse. No luck. Finally, she found them on her desk. Yesterday, she forgot her neighbor's name. She feels like her memory is playing tricks on her and has started to worry.

She decided to see her doctor. After a complete checkup, the doctor reassured her that she was fine. Her forgetfulness was likely just a normal part of growing older. The doctor suggested that Mary continue to make healthy food choices, be physically and socially active, and manage her high blood pressure. These things are good for her physical health and may help her maintain her memory longer.

Memory Changes With Age

Getting older changes all parts of the body, including the brain. As a result, some people notice that they don't remember information as well as they once did and aren't able to recall it as quickly. It may take longer to learn new things or remember certain words. You may lose things around the house or forget to pay a bill. Changes like these are often signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems.

There are a variety of techniques that may help you stay healthy and adapt to changes in memory and mental skills. Here are some ideas:

- Learn a new skill.
- Follow a daily routine.
- Use to-do lists, notes, and calendars to help plan tasks.
- Put items you use frequently in the same place each day.
- Stay involved in activities that can help keep both your mind and body active.
- Volunteer in your community, at a school, or at your place of worship.
- Spend time with friends and family.
- Try to sleep at least seven to nine hours each night.
- Stay physically active and eat well.
- Prevent or control high blood pressure.
- Avoid or limit alcohol.
- Get help if you feel depressed for weeks at a time.

Signs of Serious Memory Problems

Unlike normal forgetfulness, serious memory problems make it hard to do everyday tasks. For example, you may find it difficult to drive, find the bathroom in your home, or recognize friends and family. Other signs of serious memory problems may include:

- Asking the same questions over and over again
- Getting lost in places you used to know well
- Having trouble following recipes or directions
- Becoming more confused about time, people, and places
- Not taking care of yourself — eating poorly, not bathing, or behaving unsafely

Many things can cause serious memory problems, such as blood clots, depression, and **Alzheimer's disease** or related dementias. Once you know the cause of your memory problems, you can find ways to help manage them.

Worried About Your Forgetfulness?

Talk with a health care provider. Tell them about your concerns. Be sure to make a follow-up appointment to check your memory in the next six months to a year. If you think you might forget, ask a family member, friend, or the doctor's office to remind you.

Conditions That May Cause Memory Problems

If you are having signs of a serious memory problem, a doctor can help you figure out the cause. Some serious memory problems can be treated or managed. For conditions that won't go away, like Alzheimer's or another **dementia**, doctors can help you cope with the symptoms.

Mild Cognitive Impairment

Some older adults have a condition called **mild cognitive impairment** (MCI), meaning they have more memory or thinking problems than other people their age. People with MCI can usually take care of themselves and are able to carry out their day-to-day tasks. MCI may be an early sign of Alzheimer's, but not everyone with MCI will develop Alzheimer's.

A doctor can do thinking, memory, and language tests to see if you have MCI. They may also suggest that you see a specialist for more tests. Since MCI may be an early sign of more serious memory problems, it's important to see a doctor or a specialist every six to 12 months.

At this time, there is no standard treatment for MCI, but there are things you can do that may help you stay healthy and deal with changes in your memory. Check out the list on page 4 for suggestions on some ways to help your memory.

Anna and Marie's Story

Anna thought that her mother, Marie, was still going strong at 85. She kept busy with friends and church activities. But recently, Anna started to notice changes. Her mother was becoming more forgetful and confused. Also, she was spending a lot of time alone in her house. One day, she even got lost on her way home from grocery shopping.

Anna knew it was time to get help and took her mother to the doctor. The doctor told them that Marie has dementia. It has been tough, but learning about ways to manage the disease and what to expect in the future has helped the whole family. Anna and Marie are taking life one day at a time.

Dementia

Dementia is not a normal part of aging. People with dementia lose their ability to think, remember, learn, and reason, which makes everyday activities challenging. Memory loss, though common, is not the only sign of dementia. People with dementia may also struggle to find the right word to use, have trouble paying attention, or see and hear things that are not there. Some people experience personality changes.

Differences Between Normal Aging and Dementia

Age-Related Forgetfulness	Dementia
Making a bad decision once in a while	Making poor judgments and decisions often
Missing a monthly payment	Missing monthly payments often
Forgetting which day it is and remembering later	Losing track of the date or time of year
Sometimes forgetting which word to use	Trouble having a conversation
Losing things from time to time	Misplacing things often and being unable to find them

There are different types of dementia, and symptoms may vary from person to person. Types of dementia include:

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's causes memory problems that worsen slowly over time. People with Alzheimer's have trouble thinking clearly and may find it hard to do everyday things like shopping, driving, and cooking. As the disease gets worse, people with Alzheimer's may need someone to take care of all their daily needs at home or in a nursing home. These needs may include feeding, bathing, and dressing.

Vascular Dementia

Signs of **vascular dementia** can begin gradually or can occur suddenly. This is because, in vascular dementia, memory loss and confusion are caused by changes in the blood supply to the brain, often after a stroke. If the person has additional strokes, vascular dementia may get worse. If the strokes stop, a person may get better or stay the same for a long time. People with vascular dementia can reduce their risk of having additional strokes by managing their blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes.

Lewy Body Dementia

In **Lewy body dementia**, proteins form clumps in the brain called Lewy bodies. This can lead to problems with thinking, movement, behavior, and mood. Like Alzheimer's, symptoms of Lewy body dementia get worse over time. People with Lewy body dementia may see or hear things that are not there and may have trouble thinking, remembering, and sleeping. Lewy body dementia can also cause movement problems that may make the person shake, lose their balance, or walk more stiffly.

Frontotemporal Disorders

Frontotemporal disorders are rare and usually affect people at a younger age than other types of dementia. Most people with frontotemporal disorders are 45 to 65 years old. Frontotemporal disorders happen when nerve cells in certain parts of the brain are damaged. The damage can cause unusual behaviors, emotional problems, trouble communicating, difficulty with work, or difficulty with walking. The symptoms of frontotemporal disorders get worse over time.

Serious Memory Problems: Next Steps

If you think you may have a serious memory problem like dementia, talk to a doctor. To find out if you have dementia, doctors can:

- Give you a physical exam and ask about past medical problems
- Review a list of all the medications you take
- Ask questions about your family's health
- Find out how well you can do everyday things like driving, shopping for food, and paying bills
- Ask questions about your mental health
- Talk with family about your memory problems
- Test your memory, problem-solving, counting, and language skills
- Check your blood and urine, and do other medical tests
- Order **brain scans** to look for signs of disease

Some of the tests and procedures used to diagnose dementia may not be covered by health insurance. Check with your insurance provider and talk with your health care team to determine what options may work best for you.

An early diagnosis may help you find ways to manage the condition and plan for the future. In the early stages of dementia, it might be possible to continue with some everyday activities. As the disease progresses, you will need to adopt new strategies to help adjust.

James' Story

A few months ago, James noticed that he was having a harder time remembering things. He lost his appetite and couldn't sleep through the night. He didn't feel like talking to his friends on the phone. He became confused and irritable. James decided to go to the doctor to see if something was wrong. His doctor said that he was having a bad reaction to one of his medications. Once his doctor changed the medication, James felt more like himself.

Other Causes of Memory Problems

It's possible for memory problems to result from factors unrelated to dementia or normal aging. For example, medical conditions, such as depression or blood clots, can cause memory problems. These problems usually go away once the condition is successfully treated.

Factors that may cause memory problems include:

- Head injury, such as a concussion
- Blood clots, tumors, or infections in the brain
- Thyroid, kidney, or liver problems
- Medication side effects
- Mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety
- Alcohol or drug misuse
- Sleep problems
- Low levels of important nutrients, such as vitamin B12
- Not eating enough healthy foods

Major, traumatic, or stressful life events can also cause memory problems. For example, someone who has recently experienced the death of a loved one may experience strong negative emotions that leave them confused or forgetful.

These memory problems from negative emotions are usually temporary and will improve as the stress and emotions fade. Being physically active, staying connected with friends and loved ones, and learning new skills can help with both memory and improving mood. If memory problems persist after a few weeks, talk with a doctor, as this may be a sign of something more serious.

Finding the cause of memory problems is important for determining the best course of action. Once the cause is diagnosed, you and your doctor can determine the best plan to manage symptoms. People with memory problems should make a follow-up appointment to check their memory every six to 12 months.

A Note About Unproven Memory Enhancements or Treatments

Some people may be tempted by untried or unproven over-the-counter drugs and other products that claim to make the brain sharper or prevent dementia. Be cautious of pills, supplements, brain training computer games, and similar treatments that promise to improve memory or prevent brain disorders. These might be unsafe, a waste of money, or both. They might even interfere with other medical treatments. Consult with a doctor before investing in any of these products.

Currently, there are no drugs or lifestyle approaches that can prevent Alzheimer's or a related dementia. In the meantime, generally leading a healthy lifestyle, including controlling high blood pressure, being physically active, and making healthy dietary choices, can help reduce your risk of many chronic health conditions and may help reduce your risk of dementia.

Gloria's Story

Gloria visits her Aunt Vivian every weekend to cook with her and help around the house. Aunt Vivian is usually very active — she loves gardening, listening to music, and chatting with friends. But lately, her mood has started to change. She seems sad all the time and just wants to sleep all day and night. When Aunt Vivian started becoming really forgetful, Gloria was afraid something was wrong, so she took her to see a doctor. The doctor said Aunt Vivian had depression. He prescribed medication and recommended that she see a counselor or therapist.

After three months, Gloria could see the change in Aunt Vivian. Her memory is better, she is eating and sleeping better, spending more time with friends, and doing volunteer work.

How To Support Someone With Memory Loss

If your family member or friend has a serious memory problem, you can help them live as normal a life as possible. Encourage them to stay physically active and keep up with their everyday routines. Remind them of the time of day, where they live, and what is happening at home and in the world. Tell them when it is time to take their medication and go with them to visit the doctor.

Some families use the following tools and strategies to help with memory problems:

- Large calendars to highlight important dates and events
- Lists of the plans for each day
- Notes about safety in the home
- Written directions for using common household items
- Medication reminders using mobile technology, such as smartphone apps or a device that can be worn on the wrist
- Maps and location services on mobile phones to provide directions or help family members know a person's location

Communication can be hard for someone with serious memory problems. These tips can help make communication easier:

- Make eye contact and call the person by name.
- Be aware of your tone, how loud your voice is, how you look at the person, and your body language.

- Use other methods besides speaking, such as gentle touching.
- Be patient with angry outbursts. Remember, it's the illness "talking," not the person.
- Try distracting the person if communication leads to a conflict or makes the person agitated or stressed. For example, look through a photo album together.
- Be open to the person's concerns, even if they are hard to understand.

Clinical Trials and Studies

Scientists are trying to better understand causes and potential treatments for memory problems. Joining a clinical trial or other research study is a way to help scientists understand aging and memory loss.

Scientists need different types of people to volunteer for research, including people with:

- Alzheimer's or MCI
- A family history of Alzheimer's or another dementia
- No memory problems and no family history of Alzheimer's

To learn more about clinical trials, you can call the Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center at **800-438-4380** or email **adear@mail.nih.gov**.

You can also search for clinical trials near you at **www.alzheimers.gov/clinical-trials**.

Points To Remember

- There are differences between normal forgetfulness and more serious memory problems.
- It's important to know about the causes of more serious memory problems and recognize the signs.
- You can get help and support for mild and serious memory problems.

If you are having trouble with your memory, work with a doctor to figure out what is causing the issues so you can get the most helpful treatment and support. Figuring out what's happening can also help you plan for the future. Some memory problems get worse over time, and planning ahead can enable you to make decisions about health, legal, and financial matters as early as possible.

Words To Know

Alzheimer's disease

(**Allz**-high-merz duh-**zeez**)

A disease that causes previously healthy nerve cells in the brain to stop working properly and eventually die, resulting in widespread loss of brain function. These changes make it hard for a person to remember things, have clear thinking, and make good judgments. The symptoms vary from person to person and get worse over time.

Brain scan

(brayn skan)

A type of test a doctor may use to look for changes in the brain. While a person lies down, an instrument takes pictures to show normal and problem areas of the brain.

Dementia

(duh-**men**-shuh)

A loss of cognitive functioning. This means changes to a person's thinking, remembering, reasoning, and behavior that make daily life and activities difficult to manage.

Frontotemporal disorders

(frun-**toe**-tem-**pour**-ul diss-**or**-derz)

Also called FTD. A group of medical conditions caused by damage to nerve cells in specific areas of the brain. The signs can occur in both younger and older adults. These signs may include unusual behaviors, emotional problems, trouble communicating, difficulty with work, or difficulty with walking.

Lewy body dementia

(**Lew**-ee **baa**-dee duh-**men**-shuh)

Also called LBD. A medical condition caused by changes in the brain from abnormal protein clusters, called Lewy bodies. Early on, the signs of LBD may be very mild but increase over time. Signs include problems with thinking, movement, behavior, and mood.

Mild cognitive impairment

(mild **kog**-ni-tiv im-**pair**-ment)

Also called MCI. A medical condition that causes people to have more memory problems than other people their age. The signs of MCI are not as severe as those of Alzheimer's. They include losing things often, forgetting to go to events and appointments, and having more trouble coming up with the right words.

Vascular dementia

(**vas**-kue-ler duh-**men**-shuh)

A medical condition caused by changes in the blood supply to the brain, often after a stroke. Signs can begin gradually or can occur suddenly. These signs include changes in memory, language, thinking skills, and mood.

For More Information

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

800-438-4380

adear@nia.nih.gov | www.alzheimers.gov

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

Alzheimers.gov

www.alzheimers.gov

Visit Alzheimers.gov for information and resources on Alzheimer's and related dementias from across the federal government.

National Institute of Mental Health

866-615-6464

nimhinfo@nih.gov | www.nimh.nih.gov

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

800-352-9424

braininfo@ninds.nih.gov | www.ninds.nih.gov

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

eldercarelocator@USAging.org | https://eldercare.acl.gov

Alzheimer's Association
800-272-3900
info@alz.org | www.alz.org

Alzheimer's Foundation of America
866-232-8484
info@alzfdn.org | www.alzfdn.org

Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration
866-507-7222
info@theaftd.org | www.theaftd.org

Lewy Body Dementia Association
800-539-9767 (Lewy Line)
404-935-6444
www.lbda.org

McKnight Brain Research Foundation
https://mcknightbrain.org

National Institute
on Aging

NIH Publication No. 24-AG-5442
April 2024