

Memory loss: When to seek help

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A number of conditions — not only Alzheimer's disease — can cause memory loss in older adults. Getting a prompt diagnosis and appropriate care is important.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Everyone forgets things at some time. How often have you misplaced your car keys or forgotten the name of a person you just met?

Some degree of memory problems, as well as a modest decline in other thinking skills, is a fairly common part of aging. There's a difference, however, between normal changes in memory and the type of memory loss associated with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders. And some memory problems are the result of treatable conditions.

If you're experiencing memory problems, talk to your doctor to get a timely diagnosis and appropriate care.

Memory loss and aging

Normal age-related memory loss doesn't prevent you from living a full and productive life. For example, you may forget a person's name, but recall it later in the day. You might misplace your glasses occasionally. Or maybe you find that you need to make lists more often than in the past in order to remember appointments or tasks.

These changes in memory are generally manageable and don't disrupt your ability to work, live independently or maintain a social life.

Memory loss and dementia

The word "dementia" is an umbrella term used to describe a set of symptoms, including impairment in memory, reasoning, judgment, language and other thinking skills.

Dementia begins gradually in most cases, worsens over time and significantly impairs a person's abilities in work, social interactions and relationships.

Often, memory loss is one of the first or more-recognizable signs of dementia. Other early signs may include:

- Asking the same questions repeatedly
- Forgetting common words when speaking
- Mixing words up — saying "bed" instead of "table," for example
- Taking longer to complete familiar tasks, such as following a recipe
- Misplacing items in inappropriate places, such as putting a wallet in a kitchen drawer
- Getting lost while walking or driving around a familiar neighborhood
- Undergoing sudden changes in mood or behavior for no apparent reason
- Becoming less able to follow directions

Diseases that cause progressive damage to the brain — and consequently result in dementia — include:

- Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia
- Vascular dementia (multi-infarct dementia)
- Frontotemporal dementia
- Lewy body dementia

Each of these conditions has a somewhat different disease process (pathology). Memory impairment isn't always the first sign of disease, and the type of memory problems may vary.

Mild cognitive impairment

Mild cognitive impairment is a notable change in thinking skills that's limited, for the most part, to a narrow set of problems, such as impairment only in memory. Changes in concentration, attention or mental quickness may also be observed. Mild cognitive impairment generally doesn't prevent a person from carrying out everyday tasks and being socially engaged.

Researchers and physicians are still learning much about mild cognitive impairment. For many people, the condition eventually progresses to Alzheimer's disease or another disorder causing dementia.

Other people experience little progression in memory loss, and they don't develop the whole spectrum of symptoms associated with dementia.

Reversible causes of memory loss

Many medical problems can cause memory loss or other dementia-like symptoms. Most of these conditions can be successfully treated, and your doctor can screen you for conditions that cause reversible memory impairment.

Possible causes of reversible memory loss include:

- **Medications.** A single medication or a certain combination of medications may result in forgetfulness or confusion.
- **Minor head trauma or injury.** A head injury from a fall or accident — even an injury that doesn't result in a loss of consciousness — may cause memory problems.
- **Depression or other mental health disorders.** Stress, anxiety or depression can cause forgetfulness, confusion, difficulty concentrating and other problems that disrupt daily activities.
- **Alcoholism.** Chronic alcoholism can seriously impair mental abilities. Alcohol can also cause memory loss by interacting with medications.
- **Vitamin B-12 deficiency.** Vitamin B-12 helps maintain healthy nerve cells and red blood cells. A vitamin B-12 deficiency — common in older adults — can cause memory problems.
- **Hypothyroidism.** An underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) slows the processing of nutrients to create energy for cells (metabolism). Hypothyroidism can result in forgetfulness and other thinking problems.
- **Tumors.** A tumor in the brain may cause memory problems or other dementia-like symptoms.

When to see your doctor

If you're concerned about memory loss, see your doctor. He or she can conduct tests to judge the degree of memory impairment and diagnose the cause.

Your doctor is likely to have a number of questions for you, and you will benefit by having a family member or friend along to answer some questions based on his or her observations. Questions may include:

- How long have you been experiencing memory problems?
- What medications — including prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs and dietary supplements — do you take regularly? What is the dosage of each?
- Have you recently started taking a new drug?

- What tasks do you find too difficult to perform or finish?
- What have you done to cope with memory problems? Have these things helped you?
- Do you drink alcohol? How much do you drink daily?
- Have you recently been in an accident, fallen or injured your head?
- Have you recently been sick?
- Have you recently felt sad, depressed or anxious?
- Have you recently experienced a major loss, change or stressful event in your life?
- What is your daily routine? How has your routine changed recently?

In addition to a general physical exam, your doctor will likely conduct relatively brief question-and-answer tests to judge your memory and other thinking skills. He or she may also order blood tests and brain-imaging tests that can help identify reversible causes of memory problems and dementia-like symptoms.

You may also be referred to a specialist in diagnosing dementia or memory disorders, such as a neurologist, psychiatrist, psychologist or geriatrician.

The importance of a diagnosis

Coming to terms with memory loss and the possible onset of dementia can be difficult. A person may try to hide memory problems, and family members or friends may compensate for a person's loss of memory — sometimes without being aware of how much they've adapted to the impairment.

Getting a prompt diagnosis is important, even if it's a challenging step. Identifying a reversible cause of memory impairment enables you to get appropriate treatment. Also, an early diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment, Alzheimer's disease or a related disorder is beneficial for a number of reasons:

- Beginning treatments to manage symptoms
- Educating yourself, family and friends about the disease
- Determining future care preferences
- Identifying care facilities or at-home care options
- Settling financial or legal matters

Your doctor can help you identify appropriate community resources and organizations, such as the Alzheimer's Association, to help you cope with memory loss and other dementia symptoms.

