Understanding Memory Loss

What to do when you have trouble remembering

From the National Institute on Aging

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Introduction

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 make change, use the telephone, or find your way home 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 they can be treated
- how to cope with serious memory problems

Tips about using the booklet

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 how to say these words and what they mean in the "Words to know" section on page 24.

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. Her memory was playing tricks on her. She was starting to worry about it.

She decided to see her doctor. After a complete check-up, her doctor said that Mary was fine. Her forgetfulness was just a normal part of getting older. The doctor suggested that Mary take a class, play cards with friends, or help out at the local school to sharpen her memory.

Differences between mild forgetfulness and more serious memory problems

What is mild forgetfulness?

It is true that some of us get more forgetful as we age. It may take longer to learn new things, remember certain words, or find our glasses. These changes are often signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems.

See your doctor if you're worried about your forgetfulness. Tell him or her about your concerns. Be sure to make a follow-up appointment to check your memory in the next 6 months to a year. If you think you might forget, ask a family member, friend, or the doctor's office to remind you.

What can I do about mild forgetfulness?

You can do many things to help keep your memory sharp and stay alert. Look at the list on page 6 for some helpful ideas.

Here are some ways to help your memory:

- ☐ Learn a new skill.
- ☐ Volunteer in your community, at a school, or at your place of worship.
- ☐ Spend time with friends and family.
- ☐ Use memory tools such as big calendars, to-do lists, and notes to yourself.
- ☐ Put your wallet or purse, keys, and glasses in the same place each day.
- ☐ Get lots of rest.
- ☐ Exercise and eat well.
- ☐ Don't drink a lot of alcohol.
- ☐ Get help if you feel depressed for weeks at a time.

Spending time with friends and family may help.

What is a serious memory problem?

Serious memory problems make it hard to do everyday things. For example, you may find it hard to drive, shop, or even talk with a friend. Signs of serious memory problems may include:

- asking the same questions over and over again
- getting lost in places you know well
- not being able to follow directions
- becoming more confused about time, people, and places
- not taking care of yourself—eating poorly, not bathing, or being unsafe

What can I do about serious memory problems?

See your doctor if you are having any of the problems listed above. It's important to find out what might be causing a serious memory problem. Once you know the cause, you can get the right treatment.

Talk with your doctor if you think you have a serious memory problem.

Al's story

Al didn't know what was happening. He was having a hard time remembering things. He wasn't eating or sleeping well and didn't want to see friends. He was confused and irritable.

His wife was worried. She took him to the doctor. It turned out that Al was having a bad reaction to one of his medicines. Once his doctor changed the medicine, Al felt more like himself.

Serious memory problems—causes and treatments

Many things can cause serious memory problems, such as blood clots, depression, and Alzheimer's disease. Read below to learn more about causes and treatments of serious memory problems.

Medical conditions

Certain medical conditions can cause serious memory problems. These problems should go away once you get treatment. Some medical conditions that may cause memory problems are:

- bad reaction to certain medicines
- depression
- not eating enough healthy foods, or too few vitamins and minerals in your body
- drinking too much alcohol
- blood clots or tumors in the brain
- head injury, such as a concussion from a fall or accident
- thyroid, kidney, or liver problems

Treatment for medical conditions

These medical conditions are serious. See your doctor for treatment.

Gloria's story

Gloria was feeling sad all the time. She just wanted to sleep all day and night. She was becoming really forgetful, too. Gloria's nephew Bob was afraid something was very wrong. He took her to see a doctor. The doctor said she had depression and needed to take medicine and see a counselor.

After 3 months, Bob could see the change in his aunt. She was eating and sleeping better. Gloria also was spending more time with friends and doing volunteer work.

Emotional problems

Some emotional problems in older people can cause serious memory problems. Feeling sad, lonely, worried, or bored can cause you to be confused and forgetful.

Treatment for emotional problems

- You may need to see a doctor or counselor for treatment. Once you get help, your memory problems should get better.
- Being active, spending more time with family and friends, and learning new skills also can help you feel better and improve your memory.

Being active can help you feel better.

Joe's story

Joe was almost 74. He was still working part-time. He noticed that he was becoming more forgetful at work. He felt frustrated that it was so hard to find the right words to describe something. His boss told him that he missed a couple of meetings. He started to wonder if he had a serious problem.

Joe's wife took him to get a complete health check-up. His doctor told Joe that he had mild cognitive impairment, also called MCI. The doctor said there was no treatment for MCI, but that he would keep a close watch on Joe's memory and thinking skills. Joe felt better knowing there was a reason for his memory problems.

Mild cognitive impairment

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

As some people grow older, they have more memory problems than other people their age. This condition is called **mild cognitive impairment**, or MCI. People with MCI can take care of themselves and do their normal activities. MCI memory problems may include:

- losing things often
- forgetting to go to events and appointments
- having more trouble coming up with words than other people of the same age

Your doctor can do thinking, memory, and language tests to see if you have MCI. He or she also may suggest that you see a specialist for more tests. Because MCI may be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, it's really important to see your doctor or specialist every 6 to 12 months. See page 15 for more about Alzheimer's disease.

Treatment for MCI

- At this time, there is no proven treatment for MCI. Your doctor can check to see if you have any changes in your memory or thinking skills over time.
- You may want to try to keep your memory sharp. The list on page 6 suggests some ways to help your memory.

Anna's story

Anna's mother was still going strong at 85. She kept busy with friends and church activities. But lately, Anna had noticed changes. Her mother was becoming more forgetful and confused. Also, she was spending a lot of time alone in her house. One day, her mom got lost on her way home from shopping.

Anna knew it was time to get help. She took her mom to the doctor. Anna was really upset to learn that her mom had early-stage Alzheimer's disease. It's been tough, but learning about treatment choices, what to expect in the future, and how to live with the disease has helped the whole family. They're taking one day at a time.

Alzheimer's disease

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

Alzheimer's disease causes serious memory problems. The signs of Alzheimer's disease begin slowly and get worse over time. This is because changes in the brain cause large numbers of brain cells to die.

It may look like simple forgetfulness at first, but over time, people with Alzheimer's disease have trouble thinking clearly. They find it hard to do everyday things like shopping, driving, and cooking. As the illness gets worse, people with Alzheimer's disease may need someone to take care of all their needs at home or in a nursing home. These needs may include feeding, bathing, and dressing.

Treatment for Alzheimer's disease

- Taking certain medicines can help a person in the early or middle stages of Alzheimer's disease. These medicines can keep symptoms, such as memory loss, from getting worse for a time. The medicines can have side effects and may not work for everyone. Talk with your doctor about side effects or other concerns you may have.
- Other medicines can help if you are worried, depressed, or having problems sleeping.

See page 22 to learn where families can go for help and information.

Sam's story

Sam was an active 70-year-old who felt healthy. He couldn't believe it when, all of a sudden, he couldn't remember what somebody told him 5 minutes ago.

He went for a check-up and had some tests, including a brain scan. After reviewing the test results, the doctor told him that his forgetfulness was caused by small strokes. These strokes had damaged some of his brain cells. She said his problem was called vascular dementia.

The doctor told Sam that she couldn't cure his memory problems. But, she could give him medicine to control his high blood pressure. This medicine also would lower his chances of having more strokes.

Vascular dementia

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

Many people have never heard of **vascular dementia**. Like Alzheimer's disease, it is a medical condition that causes serious memory problems. Unlike Alzheimer's disease, signs of vascular dementia may appear suddenly. This is because the memory loss and confusion are caused by small strokes or changes in the blood supply to the brain. If the strokes stop, you may get better or stay the same for a long time. If you have more strokes, you may get worse.

Treatment for vascular dementia

You can take steps to lower your chances of having more strokes. These steps include:

- Control your high blood pressure.
- Treat your high cholesterol.
- Take care of your diabetes.
- Stop smoking.

Get your blood pressure checked each time you see the doctor.

Help for serious memory problems

What can I do if I'm worried about my memory?

See your doctor. If your doctor thinks your memory problems are serious, you may need to have a complete health check-up. The doctor will review your medicines and may test your blood and urine. You also may need to take tests that check your memory, problem solving, counting, and language skills.

In addition, the doctor may suggest a **brain scan**. Pictures from the scan can show normal and problem areas in the brain. Once the doctor finds out what is causing your memory problems, ask about the best treatment for you.

Doctors can do brain scans to check for some causes of memory problems.

What can family members do to help?

If your family member or friend has a serious memory problem, you can help the person live as normal a life as possible. You can help the person stay active, go places, and keep up everyday routines. You can remind the person of the time of day, where he or she lives, and what is happening at home and in the world. You also can help the person remember to take medicine or visit the doctor.

Some families use the following things to help with memory problems:

- ☐ big 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 (most people with Alzheimer's disease can still read)

Family members and friends can help people with serious memory problems live as normal a life as possible.

Clinical trials and studies

People with Alzheimer's disease, MCI, or a family history of Alzheimer's may be able to take part in clinical trials, a type of research study. Healthy people with no memory problems and no family history of Alzheimer's also may be able to take part in clinical trials.

Joining a clinical trial or other research study is a way to help fight Alzheimer's disease. To find out more about clinical trials:

- Call the Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center at **1-800-438-4380**. It's a free call.
- Visit the ADEAR Center website at **www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/clinical-trials**.
- Check out **www.ClinicalTrials.gov**.
- See "NIH Clinical Research Trials and You" at **www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials**.

What you need to know

- ☐ There are differences between normal forgetfulness and more serious memory problems.
- ☐ It's important to understand the causes of memory problems and how they can be treated.
- ☐ You can get help for mild and serious memory problems.

See your doctor if you are worried about your memory. It's important to find out what is causing your memory problems.

It's important to find out what is causing your memory problems.

Where can I get more information?

Contact the following organizations to learn more about memory loss. They can give you information about support groups and services, and publications on Alzheimer's disease. They can also give you information about research centers and clinical trials and studies.

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

P.O. Box 8250
Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250
Phone: **1-800-438-4380**
Website: **www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers**

The Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center offers information on diagnosis, treatment, patient care, caregiver needs, long-term care, and research related to Alzheimer's disease. Staff can refer you to local and national resources. The Center is a service of the National Institute on Aging, part of the Federal Government's National Institutes of Health.

Alzheimer's Association

Phone: **1-800-272-3900**
Website: **www.alz.org**

The Alzheimer's Association is a nonprofit organization offering information and support services to people with Alzheimer's disease and their families. Call or visit their website to find out where to get help in your area.

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

Phone: **1-866-232-8484**
Website: **www.alzfdn.org**

This foundation serves people with dementia and their caregivers and families. Services include a toll-free hotline, publications and other materials, and conferences and workshops.

Eldercare Locator

Phone: **1-800-677-1116**
Website: **www.eldercare.gov**

Families often need information about community resources, such as home care, adult day care, and nursing homes. Contact the Eldercare Locator to find these resources in your area. The Eldercare Locator is a service of the Administration on Aging. It is funded by the Federal Government.

Words to know

Alzheimer's disease

(pronounced **Allz**-high-merz duh-**zeez**)
A disease that causes large numbers of nerve cells in the brain to die. These changes make it hard for a person to remember things, have clear thinking, and make good judgments. The symptoms begin slowly and get worse over time.

Brain scan

A type of test that shows pictures of normal and problem areas of the brain.

Mild cognitive impairment

(pronounced mild **kog**-ni-tiv im-**pair**-ment)
Also called MCI. It is 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 disease. They include losing things often, forgetting to go to events and appointments, and having more trouble coming up with the right words than other people the same age.

Vascular dementia

(pronounced **vas**-kue-ler duh-**men**-shuh)
A medical condition caused by small strokes or changes in the brain's blood supply. Signs can appear suddenly. These signs include changes in memory, language, thinking skills, and mood.

For copies of this booklet, contact:

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center
P.O. Box 8250
Silver Spring, MD **20907-8250**

Phone: **1-800-438-4380**
Website: **www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers**

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