

Age Page

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 but 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 lose things like their glasses. These usually are signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems.

Some older adults also find that they don't do as well as younger people on complex memory or learning tests. Scientists have found, though, that given enough time, healthy older people can do as well as younger people do on these tests. 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 serious medical conditions like these 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 instance, 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.

The confusion and forgetfulness caused by emotions usually are temporary and go away when the feelings fade. But if these feelings last for more than 2 weeks, it is important to get help from a doctor or counselor. Treatment may include counseling, medication, or both.

More Serious Memory Problems

For some older people, memory problems are a sign of mild cognitive impairment, Alzheimer's disease, or a related dementia. People who are worried about memory problems should see a doctor. The doctor might conduct or order a thorough physical and mental health evaluation to reach a diagnosis. Often, these evaluations are conducted by a neurologist, a physician who specializes in problems related to the brain and central nervous system.

A complete medical exam for memory loss should review the person's medical history, including the use of prescription and over-the-counter medicines; family history of dementia; a physical exam; and neurological tests to assess memory, balance, language, and other cognitive functions. A correct diagnosis depends on accurate details, so

in addition to talking with the patient, the doctor might ask a family member, caregiver, or close friend for information.

Blood and urine tests can help the doctor find or rule out possible causes of the memory problems. A brain scan also may help identify or rule out some causes of the memory problems.

Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI).

Some people with memory problems have a condition called amnesic mild cognitive impairment, or amnesic MCI. People with this condition have more memory problems than normal for people their age, but their symptoms are not as severe as those of people with Alzheimer's disease, and they are able to carry out their normal daily activities.

Signs of MCI include losing things often, forgetting to go to important events or appointments, and 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.

Researchers have found that more people with MCI than those without it go on to develop Alzheimer's. However, not everyone who has MCI develops Alzheimer's.

There is no standard treatment for MCI. Typically, the doctor will monitor and test a person with MCI every 6 to 12 months to

detect any changes in memory and other thinking skills over time. No medications have been approved to treat MCI.

Dementia. Dementia is the loss of thinking, memory, and reasoning skills and behavioral abilities to such an extent that it interferes 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.

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 forms of dementia in older people are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. These types of dementia cannot be cured at present.

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,

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.
- 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 sure whether exercise can help prevent or delay dementia. Exercise can 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. Although some studies suggest that moderate alcohol use has health benefits, heavy or binge drinking over time can cause memory loss and permanent brain damage.

judgment, recognizing family and friends, and the ability to perform daily activities. Eventually, the person needs total 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.

Treatment for Dementia

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

People with dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease may be treated with medications. Several medications are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to treat Alzheimer's. These drugs may, for some people, help slow down certain problems, such as memory loss, allowing them to remain

independent for longer. They may also help with certain behavioral problems. However, none of these drugs can stop Alzheimer's disease from progressing. Many studies are investigating medications and other interventions to prevent or delay Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline.

People with vascular dementia should take steps to prevent further strokes. These steps include controlling high blood pressure, monitoring and treating high cholesterol and diabetes, and 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 or in the world. Memory aids such as a big calendar, a list of daily plans, and notes may help.

What You Can Do

If you're concerned that you or someone you know has a serious memory problem, talk with your doctor. He or she may be able to diagnose the problem or refer you to a specialist, such as a neurologist or geriatric psychiatrist. Healthcare professionals who specialize in Alzheimer's and other dementias can recommend ways to manage the problem and suggest treatment and services that might help.

Consider participating in clinical trials or studies. People with and without memory problems may be able to take part in clinical trials, which may help themselves 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 1-800-438-4380 or visit www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/clinical-trials.

For More Information About Forgetfulness

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

1-800-438-4380 (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

1-800-272-3900 (toll-free)

1-866-403-3073 (TTY/toll-free)

info@alz.org

www.alz.org

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

1-866-232-8484 (toll-free)

info@alzfdn.org

www.alzfdn.org

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

www.eldercare.gov

National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus

www.medlineplus.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

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