

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 use the telephone, find your way home, or make change when making a purchase 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 or managed
- 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 31.

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 growing older. The doctor suggested that Mary continue to make healthy food choices, be physically and socially active, and work with her doctor to manage her high blood pressure. These things are good for her physical health and may help her maintain her memory longer.

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. Changes like these are often signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems.

Normal Aging	Alzheimer's Disease or a Related Dementia
Making a bad decision once in a while	Making poor judgments and decisions a lot of the time
Missing a monthly payment	Problems taking care of monthly bills
Forgetting which day it is and remembering it 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

What Can I Do About My Forgetfulness?

You can take steps to help your memory, such as:

- Learn a new skill.
- Follow a daily routine.
- Use memory tools such as calendars, to-do lists, and notes to yourself.
- Put your wallet or purse, keys, phone, and glasses in the same place each day.
- Volunteer in your community, at a school, or at your place of worship.*
- Spend time with friends and family.*

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, take precautions to protect yourself and others. Wash your hands often with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer, stay at least 6 feet from people who don't live in your household, wear a mask when around others, cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze, clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, and stay at home when you feel ill. Read more at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus.

- ❑ Get enough sleep, generally seven to eight hours each night.
- ❑ Exercise and eat well.
- ❑ Don't drink a lot of alcohol.
- ❑ Get help if you feel depressed for weeks at a time.

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 six months to a year. If you think you might forget, ask a family member, friend, or the doctor's office to remind you.

What Is a Serious Memory Problem?

Serious memory problems make it hard to do everyday things. For example, you may find it difficult 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
- Being unable to follow recipes or directions
- Becoming more confused about time, people, and places
- Not taking care of yourself — eating poorly, not bathing, or behaving unsafely

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.

James' Story



James 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 talk to his friends on the phone like he usually did. He was confused and irritable.

His wife was worried. She took him to the doctor. It turned out that James was having a bad reaction to one of his medicines. Once his doctor changed the medicine, James 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 or related dementias. Read below to learn more about causes and treatments of these conditions.

Medical Conditions

Certain medical conditions can cause serious memory problems. These problems should go away once you get treatment. Some 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 and can be managed. Consult 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 or therapist.

After three 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 adults can cause serious memory problems. Feeling sad, lonely, worried, or bored can cause you to be confused or forgetful.

Treatment for Emotional Problems

- You may need to see a doctor or counselor for treatment if these feelings last for more than two weeks. 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. Joe 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. The 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. To help deal with the changes in his thinking, Joe used memory tools such as daily to-do lists.

Mild Cognitive Impairment

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 or 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 more serious memory problems, it's important to see your doctor or specialist every six to 12 months.

Managing MCI

- At this time, there is no proven treatment for MCI.
- It's important that you see your doctor regularly. Your doctor can check to see if you have any changes in your memory or thinking skills over time.
- Even though there is no treatment for MCI, there are things you can do that may help you stay healthy and deal with changes in your thinking. The list on page 6 suggests some ways to help your memory.

What Is Dementia?

Dementia is the loss of your ability to think, remember, and reason to such a level that it interferes with your daily life and activities. Symptoms may include problems with language, vision — such as trouble reading or recognizing colors — or paying attention. Some people experience changes in their personality and behavior.



Early detection of symptoms is important,
as some causes can be treated.

There are different forms of dementia, characterized by the changes in the brain and symptoms. Different forms of dementia include:

- **Alzheimer's disease**
- **Vascular dementia**
- **Lewy body dementia**
- **Frontotemporal dementia**
- **Mixed dementia**

Many conditions can cause dementia or dementia-like symptoms. The following pages provide more information on the two most common forms of dementia, Alzheimer's disease (page 19), and vascular dementia (page 21). If someone is having serious memory problems, a doctor can help identify if it is dementia, and, if so, what type.

Anna and Marie's Story



Anna's mother, Marie, 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 grocery shopping.

Anna knew it was time to get help. She took Marie 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

Alzheimer's disease causes serious memory problems. The signs of Alzheimer's 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 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 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.

In some people, the signs of Alzheimer's can begin early, in their 40s, for example. Most people do not begin to have symptoms until they are much older.

Treatment for Alzheimer's Disease

- Taking certain medicines can help slow down some symptoms, such as memory loss, 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.
- Ask your doctor about other medicines that can help if you are worried, depressed, or having problems sleeping.

See page 28 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 five 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 mini-strokes that do not always show symptoms when they happen. 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. And he could continue his active lifestyle and healthy eating to help him feel better longer.

Vascular Dementia

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, signs of vascular dementia may appear suddenly. This is because the memory loss and confusion are caused by changes in the blood supply to the brain, often after a stroke. If the strokes stop, a person may get better or stay the same for a long time. If more strokes occur, vascular dementia may get worse.

Treatment for Vascular Dementia

The following steps can help reduce the risk of having more strokes:

- Control high blood pressure
- Treat high cholesterol
- Manage 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. Your doctor may also refer you to a neurologist, a doctor who specializes in treating diseases of the brain and nervous system.



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 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:

- ❑ 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 an alarm on mobile technology, such as a device that can be worn on the wrist or smartphone apps
- ❑ Maps and location services on mobile technologies to provide directions or help family members know a person's location

Communicating With Someone With Serious Memory Problems

Communication can be hard for someone with serious memory problems.

Try some of these tips to 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.
- 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.



Stay calm, and be direct and patient when talking with a loved one with memory problems.

When choosing your words, aim to be direct, specific, and positive. Here are some examples of what you can say:

- “Let’s try this way,” instead of pointing out mistakes.
- “Please do this,” instead of “Don’t do this.”
- “Thanks for helping,” even if the results aren’t perfect.

To encourage the person to communicate with you:

- Show a warm, loving, matter-of-fact manner.
- Hold the person’s hand while you talk.
- Be open to the person’s concerns, even if he or she is hard to understand.
- Let him or her make some decisions and stay involved.
- Be patient with angry outbursts. Remember, it’s the illness “talking.”

Clinical Trials and Studies

People with Alzheimer's disease, MCI, or a family history of Alzheimer's or a related dementia 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 participate.

Joining a clinical trial or other research study is a way to help fight Alzheimer's and related dementias and mild cognitive impairment. To find out more about clinical trials:

- Call the Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center at 800-438-4380. It's a free call.
- Visit the ADEAR Center website at www.alzheimers.gov.
- 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.

Finding out what is causing your memory problems is important for getting treatment and support that can help — and for planning ahead. Some memory problems get worse over time, and it's important to plan ahead and make decisions about legal and financial matters as early as possible.



Talk to your doctor 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 provide information about support groups and services, brain health, and Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. They can also share information about research centers and clinical trials and studies.

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

800-438-4380

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

The National Institute on Aging's ADEAR Center offers information and publications for families, caregivers, and health professionals on Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, including information on caregiving, clinical trials, and research. Staff members answer inquiries by phone, email, and in writing and make referrals to local and national resources. Visit the ADEAR website to learn more about Alzheimer's and related dementias, find clinical trials, and sign up for email updates.

Alzheimer's Association

800-272-3900 (toll-free)

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

info@alz.org | www.alz.org

The Alzheimer's Association is a nonprofit organization offering information and support services to people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers and families. This association provides a toll-free hotline with the federal government's Administration for Community Living.

Alzheimer's Foundation of America

866-232-8484 (toll-free)

info@alzfdn.org | www.alzfdn.org

This foundation serves people with dementia and their caregivers and families. Services include a toll-free hotline, publications, and online resources.

Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration

866-507-7222 (toll-free)

info@theaftd.org | www.theaftd.org

This nonprofit organization provides information and support to people living with frontotemporal dementia and their care partners. Services include a toll-free hotline and support groups.

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116 (toll-free)

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

The Eldercare Locator is a service of the Administration on Aging that provides information about community resources, such as home care, adult day services, and nursing homes. Contact the Eldercare Locator to find these resources in your area.

Lewy Body Dementia Association

404-935-6444

800-539-9767 (toll-free LBD Caregiver Link)

www.lbda.org

This nonprofit organization sponsors research and provides support to people living with Lewy body dementia, their families, and caregivers.

McKnight Brain Research Foundation

407-237-4485

<https://mcknightbrain.org>

This foundation, dedicated to discovering the mysteries of the aging brain, provides information about brain health, age-related cognitive decline, and memory loss.

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov

This service of the National Library of Medicine, part of the National Institutes of Health, provides consumer-friendly information and videos on various health topics and medical tests.

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

800-352-9424 (toll-free)

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

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke aims to increase knowledge about the brain and nervous system and to use that knowledge to reduce the burden of related diseases.

Words To Know

Alzheimer's Disease

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

A disease that causes a large number 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

(pronounced 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

(pronounced 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 Dementia

(pronounced frun-**toe**-tem-**pour**-ul duh-**men**-shuh)

A medical condition caused by damage to the nerve cells in 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

(pronounced **Luw**-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

(pronounced 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 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.

Mixed Dementia

(pronounced mikst duh-**men**-shuh)

A condition in which a person has two or more types of dementia. For example, someone may have both Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Vascular Dementia

(pronounced **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 appear suddenly. These signs include changes in memory, language, thinking skills, and mood.

For copies of this booklet, contact:

**Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education
and Referral Center**

800-438-4380 (toll-free)

adear@nia.nih.gov

www.alzheimers.gov



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