

Memory, Forgetfulness, and Aging: What's Normal and What's Not?

Many older adults worry about their memory and other thinking abilities. For example, they might be concerned about taking longer than before to learn new things, or they may sometimes forget to pay a bill. These changes are usually signs of mild forgetfulness — often a normal part of aging — not serious memory problems.

What's Normal Forgetfulness and What's Not?

What's the difference between normal, age-related forgetfulness and a serious memory problem? Serious memory problems make it hard to do everyday things like driving and shopping. Signs may include:

- Asking the same questions over and over again
- Getting lost in familiar places
- Not being able to follow instructions
- Becoming confused about time, people, and places

Talk with your doctor to determine whether memory and other cognitive problems are normal and what may be causing them. You may also wish to talk with your doctor about opportunities to participate in research on cognitive health and aging.

Mild Cognitive Impairment

Some older adults have a condition called mild cognitive impairment, or MCI, meaning they have more memory or other thinking problems than other people their age. People with MCI can usually take care of themselves and do their normal activities. MCI may be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, but not everyone with MCI will develop Alzheimer's.

Signs of MCI include:

- Losing things often
- Forgetting to go to important events or appointments
- Having more trouble coming up with desired words than other people of the same age

If you have MCI, visit your doctor every six to 12 months to track changes in memory and other thinking skills over time. There may be habits and behaviors you can change and activities you can do to help you maintain memory and thinking skills.

Dementia and Aging

Dementia is not a normal part of aging. It includes the loss of cognitive functioning — thinking, remembering, learning, and reasoning — and behavioral abilities to the extent that it interferes with a

person's quality of life and activities. Memory loss, though common, is not the only sign of dementia. People with dementia may also have problems with language skills, visual perception, or paying attention. Some people have personality changes.

While there are different forms of dementia, Alzheimer's disease is the most common form in people over age 65. The chart below explains some differences between normal signs of aging and Alzheimer's.

Differences Between Normal Aging and Alzheimer's Disease	
Normal Aging	Alzheimer's Disease
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

When to Visit the Doctor for Memory Loss

If you, a family member, or friend has problems remembering recent events or thinking clearly, talk with a doctor. He or she may suggest a thorough checkup to see what might be causing the symptoms.

Memory and other thinking problems have many possible causes, including depression, an infection, or medication side effects. Sometimes, the problem can be treated, and cognition — the ability to clearly think, learn, and remember — improves. Other times, the problem is a brain disorder, such as Alzheimer's disease, which cannot be reversed. Finding the cause of the problems is important for determining the best course of action.

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