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# Memory Problems, Forgetfulness, and Aging

[Español](#)

Older adults may worry about their memory and other thinking abilities, such as taking longer to learn something new. These changes are usually signs of mild forgetfulness — or age-related forgetfulness — and are often a normal part of aging.

However, more serious memory problems could be due to [mild cognitive impairment](#), [dementia](#) such as [Alzheimer's disease](#), or other factors beyond normal aging.



## Memory changes with age

As people grow older, changes occur in all parts of the body, including the brain. As a result, some people notice that they don't remember information as well as they once did and aren't able to recall it as quickly. They may also occasionally misplace things or forget to pay a bill. These usually are signs of mild forgetfulness, not a serious memory problem.

It's normal to forget things once in a while at any age, but serious memory problems make it hard to do everyday things such as driving, using the phone, and finding the way home.

Signs that it might be time to talk with a doctor include:

- Asking the same questions over and over again
- Getting lost in places you used to know well
- Having trouble following recipes or directions
- Becoming more confused about time, people, and places
- Not taking care of yourself — eating poorly, not bathing, or behaving unsafely

[Talk with a doctor](#) if you are experiencing noticeable changes in your memory. A doctor can perform tests and assessments to help determine the source of memory problems. Your health care provider may also recommend that you see a neurologist, a doctor who specializes in treating diseases of the brain and nervous system.

You may also wish to talk with your doctor about opportunities to [participate in research](#) on cognitive health and aging.

## Is Forgetfulness Normal or Not?



### Tips for dealing with forgetfulness

There are a variety of techniques that may help you stay healthy and deal better with changes in memory and mental skills. Here are some tips:

- Learn a new skill.
- Follow a daily routine.
- Plan tasks, make to-do lists, and use memory tools such as calendars and notes.
- Put your wallet or purse, keys, phone, and glasses in the same place each day.

- Stay involved in [activities](#) that can help both the mind and body.
- Volunteer in your community, at a school, or at your place of worship.
- Spend time with friends and family.
- Get enough [sleep](#), generally seven to eight hours each night.
- [Exercise](#) and [eat well](#).
- Prevent or control [high blood pressure](#).
- Avoid or limit [alcohol](#).
- Get help if you feel [depressed](#) for weeks at a time.

## Mild cognitive impairment

Some older adults have a condition called mild cognitive impairment — MCI — meaning they have more memory or thinking problems than other people their age. People with MCI can usually take care of themselves and are able to carry out their day-to-day tasks. MCI may be an early [sign of Alzheimer's disease](#), but not everyone with MCI will develop Alzheimer's.

If you're experiencing changes in your memory or think you may have MCI, talk with your doctor. Learn more about the [symptoms of MCI](#).

## Dementia versus age-related forgetfulness

Forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging. However, [dementia](#) is **not** a normal part of aging. Dementia 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 experience personality changes.

There are different types of dementia, including [Alzheimer's disease](#), [Lewy body dementia](#), [frontotemporal dementia](#), and [vascular dementia](#), and symptoms may vary from person to person. The chart below compares some differences between normal aging and the signs of dementia.



[Read and share this infographic](#) to learn about how to tell the difference between

Differences Between Normal Aging and Dementia

Normal Aging	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 else can affect memory?

It’s possible for memory problems to stem from factors unrelated to dementia or normal aging. For example, medical conditions, such as depression or blood clots, can cause memory problems. These problems usually go away once the condition is successfully treated.

Factors that may cause memory problems include:

- Head injury, such as a concussion
- Blood clots, tumors, or infections in the brain
- Thyroid, kidney, or liver problems
- [Medication side effects](#)
- Mental health conditions, such as [depression](#) and anxiety

- [Alcohol](#) or drug misuse
- [Sleep](#) problems
- Low levels of important [nutrients](#), such as vitamin B12
- Not eating enough [healthy foods](#)

Major, traumatic, or stressful life events can also cause memory problems. For example, someone who has recently retired or who is [coping with the death of a spouse](#) may feel sad, [lonely](#), worried, or bored. [Stress](#) and negative emotions are powerful. Trying to deal with such life changes and emotions leaves some people confused or forgetful.

These memory problems from negative emotions are usually temporary and will improve as the stress and emotions fade. Being active, socially engaged, and experiencing a sense of accomplishment by [learning new skills](#) can help with both memory and improving mood. If memory problems persist after a few weeks, talk with your doctor as this may be a sign of something more serious.

Finding the cause of memory problems is important for determining the best course of action. Once the cause is diagnosed, you and your doctor can determine the best treatment plan. People with memory problems should make a follow-up appointment to check their memory every six to 12 months.

## A note about unproven memory enhancements or treatments

Some people may be tempted by untried or unproven over-the-counter drugs and other products that claim to make the brain sharper or prevent dementia. Be cautious of pills, [supplements](#), brain training computer games, and similar treatments that promise to improve memory or prevent brain disorders. These might be unsafe, a waste of money, or both. They might even interfere with other medical treatments. Consult with your doctor before investing in any of these products.

Currently there are [no drugs or lifestyle approaches](#) that can prevent Alzheimer's or a related dementia. In the meantime, generally [leading a healthy lifestyle](#), including controlling high blood pressure, being physically active, and making healthy dietary choices, can help reduce your risk of many chronic health conditions and may help reduce your risk of dementia.

## You may also be interested in

- Downloading or ordering a [free pamphlet on forgetfulness](#)
- Learning more about [how the aging brain affects thinking](#)
- Finding [ways older adults can help take care of their cognitive health](#)

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## For more information about memory and aging

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

800-438-4380

[adear@nia.nih.gov](mailto:adear@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers)

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

### **Alzheimers.gov**

[www.alzheimers.gov](http://www.alzheimers.gov)

Explore the Alzheimers.gov website for information and resources on Alzheimer's and related dementias from across the federal government.

### **National Institute of Mental Health**

866-615-6464

866-415-8051 (TTY)

[nimhinfo@nih.gov](mailto:nimhinfo@nih.gov)

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

### **National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS)**

800-352-9424

[braininfo@ninds.nih.gov](mailto:braininfo@ninds.nih.gov)

[www.ninds.nih.gov](http://www.ninds.nih.gov)

### **Eldercare Locator**

800-677-1116

[eldercarelocator@USAging.org](mailto:eldercarelocator@USAging.org)

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

### **McKnight Brain Research Foundation**

407-237-4485

<https://mcknightbrain.org>

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