

# What is mild cognitive impairment?



**Alzheimer's  
Research  
UK**

Make breakthroughs possible



This introductory leaflet aims to help you understand mild cognitive impairment. It's for anyone who might be worried about their own or someone else's memory.

## Contents

Introduction	03	Diagnosis	10
What is mild cognitive impairment?	04	Treatments	12
What's the difference between MCI and dementia?	06	Reducing the risk of MCI	13
Does MCI lead to dementia?	07	Support	14
Symptoms	08	Research	15

The information here does not replace any advice that doctors, pharmacists or nurses may give you, but provides some background information we hope you will find helpful.

This leaflet was written in January 2018 and is due to be reviewed in November 2019. Please get in touch if you'd like a version with references or in a different format.

## What is mild cognitive impairment?

Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is a term used to describe early memory and thinking problems in older people. It is not a disease in itself.

While many people have a natural decline in memory and thinking as they get older, people with MCI experience problems that are greater than expected for their age. However, these difficulties tend not to get in the way of a person's day-to-day life.

MCI can be caused by a range of underlying conditions and may or may not get worse. One cause of MCI can be the early stages of Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. However, other conditions such as depression, low vitamin levels and thyroid problems can also cause similar mild memory difficulties.



Some people with MCI find that their symptoms stay the same or return to normal. MCI does not necessarily lead to dementia.

We do not have a clear picture of how many people have MCI. Research has suggested that one or two in every 10 people over 65 may have MCI or cognitive impairment. However, it is not always easy for a doctor to diagnose MCI, so it's hard to know exactly how many people are affected.

## What's the difference between MCI and dementia?

The word dementia describes a group of symptoms that can affect a person's ability to carry out daily activities without help.

These include memory problems, confusion and mood changes. A person with dementia will usually experience two or more of these symptoms, such as problems with their memory or getting lost. Someone with MCI may have only one of these symptoms and unlike dementia, it would not normally interfere with their day-to-day life.



## Does MCI lead to dementia?

Having MCI raises your risk of developing dementia in future, even if your symptoms get better over time. However, it's not yet clear how many people with MCI go on to develop dementia.

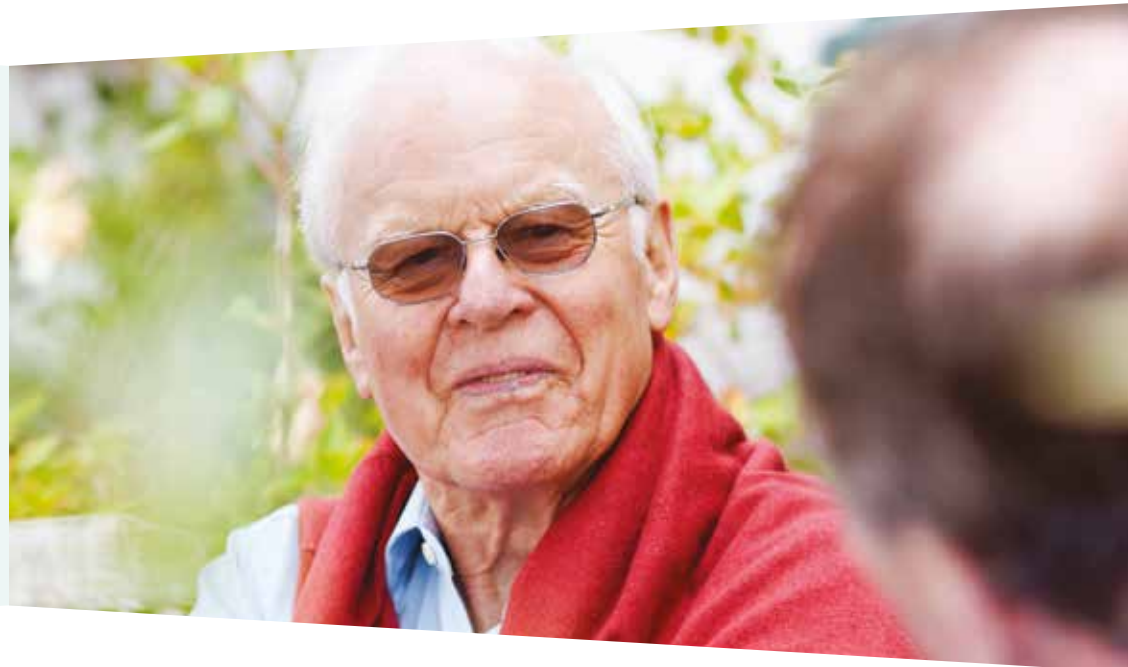
Some studies estimate that each year, 10-15% of people with a diagnosis of MCI develop dementia. Other studies have put this figure as low as 5-10%. For people who do develop dementia, the time this takes can vary from one person to another.

Factors such as older age, depression, diabetes or high blood pressure may increase the likelihood that someone with MCI will go on to develop a form of dementia like Alzheimer's disease. People with MCI who have a risk gene called APOE4 have a higher risk of developing Alzheimer's. Having this gene may also increase the risk of developing MCI in the first place.



## Symptoms

The symptoms of MCI do not normally affect daily life very much. This means that someone with MCI, or those around them, may not notice the signs at first.



These symptoms may include:



### Memory

Misplacing items or having trouble remembering recent conversations.



### Attention

Finding it difficult to concentrate, e.g. following the story of a TV programme, or working on a hobby.



### Disorientation

Confusion about time and place.



### Thinking skills

Problems with planning, reasoning or completing tasks, e.g. managing money, or cooking a balanced meal.



### Language

Problems finding the right words.



### Mood and behaviour

Some people become irritable or low in mood.

## Diagnosis

Diagnosing MCI means you can get the right help and support to plan for the future, if necessary. You may also be able to take part in vital research.



You should talk to your doctor if you are worried about your memory or thinking, or someone else's.

### If your doctor suspects MCI, they can:



Ask you about your medical history and lifestyle to rule out other possible causes.



Arrange for you to have memory and thinking tests, scans or blood tests.

After assessment your doctor may decide that your symptoms are due to another condition such as depression, anxiety or thyroid problems. If this is the case they will be able to provide the best course of treatment.

If you are diagnosed with MCI the doctor will be able to discuss what this means for you. You can continue to make decisions for yourself and carry on with the activities you enjoy.

As people with MCI are at a higher risk of developing dementia, your doctor may arrange follow-up visits to see if your symptoms get worse over time. If they do get worse, the doctor may refer you to a memory clinic or a specialist for further tests.

Unlike dementia, if you are diagnosed with MCI you may not have to tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). However, if you feel that your symptoms are affecting your driving you should inform the DVLA who will review your case. If you are unsure you should discuss this with your doctor.

## Treatments

There are currently no drug treatments available specifically for MCI.

In research studies, the medicines available for Alzheimer's disease have not been shown to help people with MCI. These treatments also do not appear to affect whether someone with MCI will go on to develop Alzheimer's or another form of dementia.

A doctor may treat any conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure that could make the symptoms worse.

Research is being carried out into non-drug treatments for MCI, such as memory training and computer-based activities, but so far the results have been mixed. The doctor may be able to suggest practical approaches to managing your symptoms, like keeping a calendar or diary. They might also suggest ways to keep physically and mentally active, such as taking regular exercise.

As some people with MCI may be in the early stages of a disease like Alzheimer's, researchers are keen to find out whether possible new treatments for dementia could work in people with MCI. To find out more about taking part in clinical trials or other research studies, visit [www.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk) or call the **Dementia Research Infoline** on **0300 111 5 111**.

## Reducing the risk of MCI

There is no sure-fire way to prevent MCI, and research is underway to learn more about the risk factors for the condition.

However there are steps we can take to keep our brains as healthy as possible. These can help reduce the risk of dementia and may also reduce the likelihood of developing MCI.

These include:



not smoking



staying mentally and physically active



eating healthily



limiting the amount of alcohol we drink



keeping blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels in check.

Further information about the risk factors for dementia can be found in our booklet '**Reducing your risk of dementia**'.

Support

There is help and support available for those worried about or affected by MCI or dementia.

The **Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline** offers practical advice and emotional support to people affected by MCI and dementia and those with concerns about obtaining a diagnosis. Call **0800 888 6678**.

**Alzheimer’s Society** provides information and services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Call **0300 222 1122**.

**Alzheimer Scotland** provides advice and local services in Scotland. Call **0808 808 3000**.

Research

Research is underway to understand the risk factors for MCI as well as identifying those with MCI who are most likely to go on to develop dementia.



Backed by our passionate scientists and supporters, we’re challenging the way people think about dementia, bringing together the people and organisations who can speed up progress, and investing in research to make breakthroughs possible.

We believe that medical research can and will deliver life-changing preventions, treatments and one day, a cure for dementia.



Find out more

If you have questions about dementia research or want to find out more about how to get involved in research, contact our **Dementia Research Infoline** on **0300 111 5 111** or email **infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org**

The Infoline operates 9.00-5.00pm Monday to Friday. Calls cost no more than national rate calls to 01 or 02 numbers and should be included in any free call packages.

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For free information, simply complete this slip and drop it straight in a post box. Alternatively, phone us on **0300 111 5555**.

### I would like to know more about

Dementia: symptoms, diagnosis, causes and risk reduction (SCIHIAAD) ☐

Reducing your risk of dementia (SCIHIRISK) ☐

Caring for someone with dementia: organisations that can help (SCIHICARE) ☐

The latest dementia research (SMTTHINK) ☐

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We'd like you to be the first to know about the latest research and how your support makes a difference, as well as ways you can get involved and help fund our life-changing work. We'll keep your information safe and never sell or swap it with anyone.

Let us know how we can contact you (tick below):

☐ Post ☐ Email ☐ Telephone ☐ Text message

You can change how we talk to you at any time, by calling **0300 111 5555** or emailing [enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org](mailto:enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org)

Our Privacy Notice can be found at [www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/privacy-policy](http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/privacy-policy) and explains how we will use and store your information.

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We are the UK's leading dementia research charity dedicated to making life-changing breakthroughs in diagnosis, prevention, treatment and cure.

We welcome your comments to help us produce the best information for you. You can let us know what you think about this booklet by contacting us using the details below.



### Contact us

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3 Riverside, Granta Park, Cambridge CB21 6AD



### Supporter care

T: 0300 111 5555  
E: [enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org](mailto:enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org)



### Dementia Research Infoline

T: 0300 111 5 111  
E: [infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org](mailto:infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org)

[www.alzheimersresearchuk.org](http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org)



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