



MEMORY LOSS: WHAT IS NORMAL?

“When I was first unable to remember things like the names of my friend’s children or an appointment, I felt scared.”

— Robert, 73 years old lawyer

Everyone forgets things. Who hasn’t lost a key or forgotten an appointment? When this happens, most of us laugh at ourselves and comment that it is just a sign of aging, especially when this happens to us in middle-age. But while we may also joke about our forgetfulness as older adults, we might also privately worry that it is a sign of Alzheimer’s disease. Many older adults understandably wonder how much and what kind of memory loss is a normal part of the aging process. They also are concerned about how much and what kind of memory loss is associated with dementia.

Why Does Memory Loss Occur?

Three different types of memory loss are described below and they each have varying reasons for occurring.

Normal Memory Loss

Changes in your body can affect memory loss as you become older. Once you reach your 20s, you slowly start to lose brain cells, and the number of brain cells lost increases with age. Your body also begins to make fewer of the chemicals needed by your brain cells to work. These changes affect how the brain stores recent memory, resulting, for example, in your forgetting the address of a place from which you just came. This type of memory loss is normal in an older person.

The old adage “use it or lose it” seems to have some application to preventing or slowing aging-related memory loss. Help keep your mind sharp by engaging in stimulating mind activities, such as reading, doing crossword puzzles. Recent research even suggests that activities such as ballroom dancing and Bingo can positively affect memory. In addition, you can use techniques to help you remember small details, such as keeping a “to do” list in a separate notebook; using a calendar to remember appointments; keeping things you use every day, like a house key, in the same place; and repeating names to yourself when you meet new people.

Reversible Memory Loss

Some medical problems that are treatable can cause symptoms like forgetfulness and short-term memory loss. Some memory loss can be due to medication reactions, brain tumors, thyroid problems, head injuries, high fever, dehydration, alcohol consumption, and vitamin B12 deficiency or poor nutrition. It's important to be aware of problems with memory and have your doctor determine if the type of memory loss can be cured partially or completely with treatment. The degree of reversibility often depends on how quickly the underlying cause is treated.

Traumatic or stressful life events, as well as certain emotions, like anxiety and depression, can effect concentration and lead short-term or reversible memory loss. Major life events like relocation or sudden changes in work status can all contribute to confusion or sadness. When grieving the sudden loss of a loved one, for example, or when feeling lonely and isolated, your ability to remember and recall events, people, and other situations in your life may decrease. Memory losses connected with your overall mental health may be alleviated as you begin to adapt to your new circumstances and/or receive treatment for the difficult emotions undermining your sense of well-being.

Permanent Memory Loss

Some diseases, like Alzheimer's or vascular dementia (resulting from small strokes), cause permanent, irreversible damage to the brain cells. Most cases (90%) of established dementia (a medical condition that disrupts the way the brain works) are either Alzheimer's disease or vascular dementias – with Alzheimer's disease almost twice as more prevalent than vascular dementia. These dementias usually require specialized medical attention to best diagnose and properly treat them.

When Should I Be Concerned About Memory Loss?

Misplacing your wallet or leaving your credit card at a store counter is considered forgetfulness. As we age, it is not uncommon to experience moments of forgetfulness. But when forgetfulness becomes frequent and consistent, affecting many areas of your life, it is cause for concern. Here are some examples:

- Repeating the same phrases, questions, or stories in the same conversation.
- Forgetting how to do routine tasks—like brushing your teeth bathing, combing your hair, or turning off an iron.
- Not being able to keep track of what happens each day— e.g., failing to recall which of the morning medicines were taken.
- Being confused as to which day of the week it is.
- Trouble making decisions or handling money.
- Getting lost in familiar places.
- Misplacing items in unusual places (putting your hairbrush in the freezer).
- Having friends and/or family concerned about your memory

What Should I Do if I Have Symptoms of Memory Loss?

If you recognize yourself in some of the items listed above, remember that it is quite normal to be anxious and even embarrassed; it is also very common to be afraid and deny what is happening. *The best thing to do is to put your hesitancy aside and see your physician for a complete physical to determine the cause of your memory loss.* Remember that some causes of memory loss are reversible, and even those that are not may be slowed down with treatment. Often the true source of forgetfulness is not readily apparent and only a physician can help you diagnose the real cause of your memory loss.

Typically, a doctor's assessment will include looking at your medical and mental health history and family background, a physical exam and laboratory tests, a brain imaging scan, and oral and written tests measuring things like memory, attention span, language ability, and thinking skills. Often your doctor will need to involve other specialists to gather this information and make an informed diagnosis. This thorough assessment will tell your doctor whether your memory loss is normal, reversible, or permanent.

What Should I Do If I Have Permanent Memory Loss?

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or other permanent dementia is often devastating and quite frightening. However, many people find solace in knowing they are not alone and in talking with others who are coping and preparing their lives for similar changes. Support groups are important places to obtain helpful information about the disease, community resources, and practical problem-solving strategies. A wealth of excellent information about Alzheimer's and other permanent dementias is available for patients and their families on the Internet, in libraries and bookstores, and through national and local organizations.

Where to Get Help

Governmental Resources

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center (ADEAR). A National Institute on Aging (NIA) Center created to compile, archive, and disseminate information concerning Alzheimer's disease for health professionals, as well as people with Alzheimer's disease and their families. Phone: 1-800-438-4380. Web site: www.alzheimers.org

National Institutes of Health (NIH). NIH's Senior Health Web site defines Alzheimer's disease, its causes and risk factors, symptoms, treatments, and research. It includes a short but definitive video about how Alzheimer's disease affects the neurons in the brain (at the end of the *Alzheimer's Disease Defined* section).

Web site: www.nihseniorhealth.gov/alzheimersdisease/toc.html

MedlinePlus. This medical library offered by the National Institutes of Health and The National Library of Medicine provides consumers and health professionals with information on Alzheimer's disease.

Web site: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/print/alzheimersdisease.html

United States Administration on Aging (AOA). Information about Alzheimer's disease is available for the public (including caregivers) and professionals. Phone: 1-202-619-0724. Web site: www.aoa.gov (click on *Elders and Families*, then click on *Alzheimer's Resource Room, Elders and Caregivers*).

Non-Profit Resources

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The AARP Health Guide on the this national association's Web site (click on *Alzheimer's* under *Frequently Requested Topics*) includes information on how the disease is diagnosed and how it can be treated. It also includes an extensive FAQ section.

Phone: 1-888-687-2277. Web site: www.aarp.org/health/healthguide

Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation. This organization's Web site provides information about the disease, treatment, research, continuing care options, and locating a service provider in your area.

Phone: 1- 800-259-4636.

Web site: www.alzinfo.org

The Alzheimer's Association Nationwide Center Helpline. This Association's helpline serves people with memory loss, caregivers, health care professionals, and the public. Helpline staff provide reliable guidance and information to all those in need. Phone lines are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Phone: 1- 800-272-3900.

Web site: www.alz.org

Public Broadcasting Service: *The Forgetting, A Portrait of Alzheimer's*. The content from this 2004 Emmy Award winning program covers symptoms, risk factors, and coping methods, and resources. Web site: www.pbs.org/theforgetting

New York City Resources

Alzheimer's Association, New York City Chapter. This local chapter maintains a helpline that is available 24 hours, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, serving all five boroughs. Calls are answered by specially trained volunteers and staff who offer information, referrals, and support.

Phone: 1-212-983-0700 or 1-800-272-3900.

Web site: www.alznyc.org or www.alzheimernyc.org

New York Online Access To Health (NOAH). This online facility, the creation of four NYC library organizations, provides access to reliable consumer health information in both English and Spanish, including the basics of Alzheimer's disease, possible causes and prevention, diagnosis and symptoms, care and treatment, alternative therapies, caregiver issues, support groups, and legal and financial advice.

Web site: www.noah-health.org

New York City's Department for the Aging. This Department's Alzheimer's and Long-Term Care Unit has experts in dementia and long-term care issues who are available to help you develop a plan of care that can benefit both you and your loved one. Services provided include assessment of needs, individual and family counseling, assistance with nursing home placement process, and information on housing alternatives (e.g., assisted living, enriched housing). All services provided by the unit are free and strictly confidential. Phone: 1-212- 442-3086.
Web site: www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/html/alzheimer-ltc.html

This resource provides brief, general information about this health care topic. It does not take the place of specific instructions you receive from your health care providers. For answers to other questions consult your physician or other health care provider.

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