

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

[Talk with your doctor](#) to determine whether [memory](#) and other cognitive problems, such as the ability to clearly think and learn, are normal and what may be causing them.

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

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

Tips For Dealing With Forgetfulness

People with some forgetfulness can use a variety of techniques that may help them stay healthy and deal with changes in their 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](#).
- Don't drink a lot of 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](#), 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.

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

At your doctor visit, he or she can perform tests and assessments, which may include a brain scan, to help determine the source of memory problems. Your doctor may also recommend you see a neurologist, a doctor who specializes in treating diseases of the brain and nervous system.

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 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. Once you know the cause, you can make the right treatment plan. People with memory problems should make a follow-up appointment to check their memory every six to 12 months. They can ask a family member, friend, or the doctor's office to remind them if they're worried they'll forget.

Learn more about [cognitive health](#) and [Alzheimer's and related dementias](#).



A Note About Unproven Treatments

Some people are tempted by untried or unproven "cures" that claim to make the brain sharper or prevent dementia. Be cautious of pills, supplements, brain training computer games, or other products 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. Currently there is no drug or treatment that prevents Alzheimer's or related dementias.

However, there are currently several drugs available by prescription to safely treat the symptoms of early and mid-stage Alzheimer's. If you have been diagnosed with dementia, your doctor may suggest that you take one of them.

How to protect yourself and others from unproven treatments:

- Beware if the product claim seems too promising and if it conflicts with what you've heard from your health care provider.
- Question any product that claims to be a "scientific breakthrough." Companies marketing these products often take advantage of people when they are most vulnerable and looking for a miracle cure.
- Check with your doctor or health care professional before buying any product, including those labeled as dietary supplements, that promises to improve your memory or prevent dementia.
- Report any products or supplements being advertised as a treatment for Alzheimer's or other diseases on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's website.

We Can Help!

Alzheimer's Orange County

Call 844.373.4400

For more caregiver tips

**Visit us at:
www.alzoc.org/resources**

Information taken from the National Institute on Aging, part of the National Institutes of Health

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health> | NIH Oct 2020 | Reviewed by AlzOC April 2022