

Recognizing and Treating Memory Loss

It is normal for older people to experience lapses in memory every now and again, or sometimes have a difficult time remembering a name. But when does the occasional “senior moment” become cause for true concern about a person’s mental state? And what should you do to help and keep safe a loved one with memory issues?

Dementia and Alzheimer’s disease

Memory problems including Alzheimer’s disease and dementia are increasingly common as America’s population ages. Dementia is defined as chronic cognitive loss, often impacting memory; it is not a disease but rather a non-specific group of conditions. While things like stress, depression, vitamin deficiencies, and brain, kidney, liver, or thyroid disorders can all cause dementia and other memory problems, Alzheimer’s disease accounts for between 50 and 80 percent of dementia diagnoses.

With Alzheimer’s, brain cells and their neural connections progressively degenerate and die, resulting in the eventual permanent loss of memory and other crucial brain functions. While doctors do not fully understand the origins of this disease, contributing causes seem to include a combination of genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors.

The warning signs of memory loss

Again, not all memory loss and dementia are the result of Alzheimer’s disease, but if you notice a consistent pattern of behavior or issues with yourself or a loved one, it is time to talk to a doctor.

Here are just a few of the things to look for that could be early signs of memory loss:

- Communication difficulties: Frequent problems with finding the right word or recalling names of people or items, or asking the same question repeatedly
- Issues with familiar tasks: Trouble cooking a favorite recipe, traveling to a familiar location, paying bills, or playing a beloved game
- Misplacing items: Frequently putting items in out-of-the-ordinary places, like the car keys in the freezer, and not being able to retrace steps to locate the item
- Mood swings or agitation: Going from happy to angry for no apparent reason; pacing, getting upset in certain locations, or fixating on certain details
- Poor hygiene: Forgetting to bathe, brush teeth, or change clothes
- Poor judgment: Spending money in unusual or irresponsible ways; dressing inappropriately for the weather
- Wandering: Repeatedly walking off aimlessly and/or becoming lost

What to do if you or a loved one is experiencing memory loss

While it is scary to experience the signs of memory troubles the first thing to do is make a doctor's appointment. He or she should be able to assess the situation and conduct the proper testing to find the likely cause of the memory issues. Perhaps it is stress or a vitamin B12 deficiency. But if it is determined that a degenerative mental condition is to blame, there are options to consider.

Medications

While there is no cure for Alzheimer's, there are FDA-approved medications that regulate neurotransmitters, which can alleviate some of the symptoms of the disease. These drugs can help preserve thinking, memory, and communication skills, and can also aid with some related behavioral issues, but they will not halt the disease's progression and thus will only help for a limited period. However, new medicines are also in the research and development phase that can help slow the progression of the disease. Consider joining a clinical trial if one is available in your area.

Behavior and safety

Caring for a person with dementia can be very stressful and expensive, whether you decide to have a family member serve as caregiver or opt for professional help. But treating some of the common behavioral symptoms of dementia and Alzheimer's—including agitation, anxiety, aggression, sleeplessness, and wandering—can help alleviate stress on both the patient and their caregivers. Health and safety can become major concerns if a senior with memory loss does not have proper care. Wandering episodes, failure to take medications or eat properly, or a fall can be lifethreatening, so finding a safe care solution may require moving the senior to a new living situation.

Memory care communities

Memory care communities are specialized long-term care facilities that provide care and housing to seniors with dementia, Alzheimer's, and other cognitive conditions. Specially trained caregivers help residents with self-care and communication, and the properties are also well-equipped to manage safety concerns and symptoms like aggression, confusion, or wandering.

Memory care facilities can be free-standing and independently operated, but most are special units contained within a nursing home, assisted living facility, or a continuing care retirement community (CCRC, also called a life plan community).