Memory Changes: What's Normal and What's Not

We all forget things, such as where we put our car keys or even someone's name. As we get older, it may feel like this happens more often.

Normal, Age-Related Memory Changes
As we get older, our brain changes. These changes might make it a bit more difficult to remember names or recall words. We might have trouble doing multiple things at once, and we might not be able to focus or pay attention to something like we used to. Examples include:

- Difficulty remembering the name of a new acquaintance.
- Difficulty following a new recipe while talking with someone.
- Occasionally misplacing your keys.

These changes are normal and should not be cause for concern.

When to be Concerned about Memory Changes
Memory problems that might indicate a more serious problem include:

- Forgetting a loved one's name.
- Getting lost in a familiar place.
- Forgetting how to use a common object such as a phone.
- Having problems with tasks you normally find easy to do such as driving a car, shopping, or handling money.

If you are experiencing problems with your memory and thinking, talk to your health care team. They can help determine if the problems with your memory and thinking are normal or not.

You may be asked to take a test to see if memory changes can be detected. You may also be asked about your ability to carry out your daily tasks and routines.

Some memory problems are caused by problems that are treatable, including:

- Vitamin B12 deficiency
- Injury or disease
- Infections
- Certain medicines
- Poor diet or not enough fluids in the body
- Depression
- Seizures
- Strokes
- Alcohol abuse
- Thyroid problems

If there are not any reversible causes of memory changes, the changes may be caused by mild cognitive impairment or dementia.

Mild Cognitive Impairment
Some people might experience more problems with memory and thinking than other people their age. A doctor may be able to see problems with memory and thinking during an exam. If these problems do not interfere with a person's ability to carry on their daily tasks and routines, this is called mild cognitive impairment. Mild cognitive impairment may progress to dementia, but this is not always the case.

Dementia
If problems with memory and thinking affect a person's ability to care for themselves and carry out their daily tasks and routine, this is called dementia.

Coping with Memory Problems

There are things you can do to help your memory and thinking, whether your memory problems are normal or not. These include:

- Use big calendars, lists and notes to help remember important things.
- Keep items you use often in the same place.
- Print out steps for using household items.
- Use pill boxes and write down the times you take your medicines. Keep this list with your medicines. You can even add pictures of the pills with the list.

Additionally, it is important to stay healthy. This can help reduce cognitive decline. Here are some things you can do to promote a healthy brain:

- Stay active.
- Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, fish, and other lean proteins (avoid too much salt, fat, and sugar).
- Get enough rest.
- Avoid excess alcohol.
- Reduce stress in your life.
- Get regular check-ups.
- Keep your brain active and make time for hobbies.
- Meet new people, connect with family or friends.
- Volunteer.
- Use hearing aids if you have hearing loss.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 4/2025. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6977.