

# Memory Loss



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## Notes

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## What is Memory Loss?

An occasional lapse in memory happens to everyone — a misplaced set of keys or a forgotten name. Memory loss (amnesia) can be brought on by stress, brain injury or disease.

As a person ages, the brain stores and sorts information differently. It may take a little longer to recall something. This is a normal part of aging.

Memory loss that occurs suddenly, gets worse or happens with other symptoms is not a normal part of aging. This type of memory loss is known as dementia, a group of disorders that causes problems with how the brain works. Dementia often cannot be cured.

## What Causes Memory Loss?

There are several causes of memory loss, including:

- aging
- disease  
(heart disease, depression, AIDS, Parkinson's disease)
- Alzheimer's disease or other dementia  
(disorders that affect the brain)
- stroke (brain attack)
- brain/head injury
- alcohol or drug abuse
- stress (loss of a loved one, a heavy workload)
- reaction to anesthesia or medicine(s) side effects
- lack of sleep.

## When is Memory Loss Serious?

Memory loss that happens more than once in a while can be a symptom of a group of brain diseases known as dementia. In dementia, nerve cells die and/or communication stops between the nerve cells.

Dementia causes changes in personality, behavior and memory. These changes can seriously affect a person's ability to do everyday activities.

The most common cause of dementia in adults age 65 and older is Alzheimer's disease. It affects the part of the brain that controls thought, memory, reason, judgment and language. Symptoms begin slowly and get worse with time. Symptoms include:

- having trouble with short-term memory
- being confused in familiar places
- losing weight
- having trouble doing things in steps (following recipes) or doing simple tasks such as combing hair
- asking the same question over and over
- having problems speaking, reading, writing or understanding
- having a change in your personality
- having trouble recognizing family members.

If you think you or a loved one may have Alzheimer's disease, call your primary care provider.

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## What are Some Ways to Support Caregivers?

Taking care of someone with memory loss can be stressful and time-consuming. Taking care of yourself is important so you can stay healthy and provide care.

- Keep other family members and/or friends informed so they can offer care. Plan for breaks and ask family and friends to help. Time apart is important for both caregiver and a person with memory loss.
- Check into home health care or outside care facilities if you cannot give regular care.
- Join a support group for caregivers.
- Be patient with yourself. You may feel irritated or upset at times, but try not to blame anyone. Don't take your frustration out on your loved one. Talk with a family member, friend, professional or support group about your feelings.

## When Should You Call Your Primary Care Provider?

Call your primary care provider if you have or your loved one has:

- new or unexplained memory loss
- memory loss that gets worse
- loss in weight/body mass
- a major change in overall health
- concerns about safety or a declining condition.

If you have any questions about memory loss, ask your primary care provider.

## What Can Your Primary Care Provider Do?

To help find the cause of memory loss, your primary care provider will give you or your loved one a medical exam. This may include:

- asking about family history
- asking about medicine use and food
- giving memory tests
- taking blood and/or urine samples
- taking a brain CT scan (computed tomography) or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging). A CT scan uses a special X-ray and an MRI uses magnetic fields to show the inside of the brain.

Based on the exam results, your primary care provider will talk with you about treatment options.

## What Types of Treatment are Available?

Treatment may vary, depending on what is causing the memory loss. Your primary care provider may suggest any of the following:

- Eat a healthful foods including plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Get regular physical activity.
- Try to reduce stress.
- Use memory aids (lists, note cards, photos or other cues to make important information easier to remember).
- Keep appointments with all health care provider(s).
- Manage any health conditions (diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol).

- Take medicine(s) as directed.
- Work on hobbies or activities that involve your mind and body.

If dementia is causing memory loss, you and/or your loved one may need to have special testing and/or see doctors who specialize in brain diseases. Your family will be a part of this process.

## How Can Caregivers Help?

If you are caring for someone who has memory loss, you can:

- Help the person remember as much as possible by making lists and other memory aids.
- Keep a list of medicine(s) on the refrigerator or another easy-to-find place. Write down all medicine(s) including prescription, over-the-counter and herbal products your loved one takes.
- Help the person make and keep all health care provider appointments.

If you are caring for someone who has dementia, there are other ways to help:

- Reduce unneeded noise and activity from the house.
- Get the person involved in crafts, games and/or music, especially his or her favorites.
- Have your loved one wear a form of identification at all times, in case he or she wanders away from home.
- Remove or secure anything that may pose a danger. Make sure sharp objects, tools and chemicals are kept in a safe place.

- Install safety rails in the bathroom or anywhere else that poses risks.
- Lower the hot water heater temperature to less than 120 F.

## Can Dementia Be Prevented?

There is nothing you can do to prevent dementia.

You can, however, change your lifestyle to reduce your risk of certain diseases, such as heart disease, stroke or diabetes.

- Eat a healthful foods low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. For information on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, visit the United States Department of Agriculture's Web site, [choosemyplate.gov](http://choosemyplate.gov).
- Get regular physical activity. Try to be physically active for at least 30 minutes most, if not all, days.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight puts you at risk for high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease.
- Quit smoking. Smoking narrows your blood vessels. This puts you at risk for heart disease and stroke.
- Lower your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- If you have diabetes, follow your care plan and keep all well check-ups with your primary care provider. Maintain healthy blood glucose levels and watch how much alcohol you drink.
- Choose hobbies that involve your mind (chess, crossword puzzles, playing a musical instrument).
- Keep your cholesterol and blood pressure levels in the normal ranges.
- See your primary care provider for regular preventive checks.