



Memory and Aging

Losing keys, misplacing a wallet, or forgetting someone's name are common experiences. But for people nearing or over age 65, such memory lapses can be frightening. They wonder if they have Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia. Developing Alzheimer's is a widespread fear of older adults.

The good news is that Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of aging. Most older adults don't get Alzheimer's! Fewer than 1 in 5 people age 65+ and less than half of those age 85+ have the disease. However, it is important to understand that our brains change over time, and it is helpful to be able to distinguish normal changes from those that require medical and psychological attention.



What Brain Changes Are Normal for Older Adults?

Although new neurons develop throughout our lives, our brains reach their maximum size during our early twenties and then begin very slowly to decline in volume. Blood flow to the brain also decreases over time. The good news is that many studies have shown that the brain remains capable of regrowth and of learning and retaining new facts and skills throughout life, especially for people who get regular exercise and frequent intellectual stimulation. Although there are tremendous differences among individuals, some cognitive abilities continue to improve well into older age, some are constant, and some decline.

Some Types of Memory Improve or Stay the Same

A type of memory called *semantic memory* continues to improve for many older adults. Semantic memory is the ability to recall concepts and general facts that are not related to specific experiences. For example, understanding the concept that clocks are used to tell time is a simple example of semantic memory. This type of memory also includes vocabulary and knowledge of language. In addition, *procedural memory*, your memory

of how to do things, such as how to tell time by reading the numbers on a clock, typically stays the same.

Some Types of Memory Decline Somewhat

Do you sometimes arrive at the grocery store and have trouble remembering what you are there to get? Do you occasionally have trouble remembering where you left your car in the parking lot? Or do you have difficulty remembering appointments such as what time you're supposed to meet your neighbor for coffee? *Episodic memory*, which captures the "what," "where," and "when" of our daily lives, is to blame. Both episodic and longer term memory decline somewhat over time.

Other types of brain functions that decrease slightly or slow down include:

- *information processing and learning something new*
- *doing more than one task at a time and shifting focus between tasks*

Possible Causes of Memory Problems

If you or a loved one is having memory problems that are more bothersome than you would normally expect, don't assume that Alzheimer's or another form of dementia is the culprit. Glitches in memory can be caused by many physical and psychological conditions that are reversible. Identify and treat the condition, and your memory will improve! For example, the following common conditions can lead to memory problems:

- *Anxiety*
- *Dehydration*
- *Depression*
- *Infections*
- *Medication side effects*
- *Poor nutrition*
- *Psychological stress*
- *Substance abuse*
- *Thyroid imbalance*

It is important to discuss these and other possible causes of memory problems with your medical doctor and to have a complete medical workup. Also, ask to see a psychologist for a complete neuropsychological evaluation to rule out anxiety, depression, or other psychological stresses and to test for cognitive changes.

Tips for Maintaining and Improving Your Memory

Here is good news about our aging brains. Scientists have identified ways to minimize age-related changes and improve everyday memory function. Here are some of their tips:

Socialize.

Participation in social and community activities improves mood and memory function.

Get moving!

Physical activities and exercise, such as brisk walking, help boost and maintain brain function.

Train your brain.

Using mnemonic strategies to remember names improves learning and memory. (Mnemonics are tricks and techniques for remembering information that is difficult to recall: An example is the mnemonic “Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain” to remember the first letters of the colors of the rainbow in order of their wave lengths: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.)

Don't buy into ageist stereotypes about memory decline.

Studies have shown that having positive beliefs about aging can improve memory performance in older adults.

It's difficult to gain knowledge if you can't see or hear well!

Make sure you wear your prescription glasses or hearing aids if you have them. And have your eyes and hearing tested regularly.

Keep a sense of control and confidence in your memory.

Don't assume that little memory lapses mean you have dementia. Use memory aids to gain and maintain confidence (see Memory Aids on next page).

Avoid distractions that divert your attention.

Distractions can range from trying to do several things at once to loud noises in the background. Even your thoughts can distract your attention. For example, if you're preoccupied with a stressful job or home environment and you're not paying attention when your friend gives you directions to her new home, you will not be able to recall how to get there.

Memory Aids

Keep “to do” lists Keep “to do” lists and put them where you will see them often. Mark off items as you accomplish them.

Establish a routine Establish a routine and follow it. For example, if you take your medicines at the same times every day, you are more likely to remember them.

Don’t rush Don’t rush. Give yourself time to memorize a new name or recall an old one.

Everything in its place Keep everything in its place: If you always put your reading glasses in the same place, you will always know where they are. Put items that you don’t want to forget in a place where you will see them when you need to. For example, hang your keys by the exit door you use most often.

Use associations Use associations. For example, picture an apple on top of a gate to recall Mrs. Applegate’s name.

Tag new information Tag new information by relating it to something that you already know and that is easy to recall. Let’s say you are in your car on the way to the hardware store and you have forgotten to make a list of the five items you need. While you still remember them, relate each item to one of five pieces of furniture in your family room: a shiny new hammer on top of the TV, a roll of duct tape on the seat of your favorite chair, and so on. When you get to the store, visualize the five pieces of furniture and their five items.

Keep a calendar Keep a paper or electronic calendar of important dates. Make sure to check it a couple of times a day.

When to Seek Professional Help

Here is an important tip: Normal memory problems do not affect your everyday living. If you forget where you put your keys, you probably just need to get better organized. However, if you forget what keys are used for or how to unlock doors, you should see a psychologist for a complete assessment and/or speak with your primary health care provider. This type of memory problem is not a normal part of aging.

Other tip-offs that a memory problem may require professional attention include:

- *Forgetting how to carry out everyday tasks, such as handling money or paying bills*
- *Not being able to learn new things, such as how to operate a new microwave or to take an alternate route to the grocery store*
- *Not recalling the names of loved ones*

The memory glitches that occur normally during older age are subtle and do not have to interfere with daily life. In fact, you can easily adapt to them by making lists, establishing routines, using associations, and employing other memory aids.

Resources

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

P.O. Box 8250
Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250
1.800.438.4380
www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov

Alzheimer's Association

225 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1700
Chicago, IL 60611-7633
1.800.272.3900
www.alz.org

Eldercare Locator

800.677.1116
www.eldercare.gov

Find a Psychologist

www.findapsychologist.org

APA Office on Aging Web site

www.apa.org/pi/aging/homepage.html

This fact sheet was developed by the APA Office on Aging and Committee on Aging, in cooperation with Elizabeth Vierck, health writer.

For more information about psychology and aging, visit the APA Office on Aging Web site listed above.