Memory Loss

Introduction
Americans are living longer than ever before. By 2030, 20 percent of Americans will be 65 or older. Although people are living longer, research shows their memory skills are not keeping pace with their age. It’s likely you or someone you know has trouble remembering things. In this HealthSmart! you will learn about:
- Common forms of memory loss.
- Signs that you or a loved one should seek medical help.
- How to get medical help for yourself or a loved one.
- How to help a loved one with memory loss.

Types of memory loss
Memory loss can happen slowly over time, making it difficult to know if and when you should seek medical help. It can range in severity and may be a sign of a correctable health problem or something more serious, such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

Reversible causes of memory loss
Some memory loss can be reversed by treating the underlying problem. Common treatments are exercise, diet, therapy and medicines. Some causes for this type of memory loss include:
- Depression, stress or lack of sleep.
- Side effects of medication.
- Alcoholism.
- Thyroid problems.
- Lack of vitamins, such as B-12.
- Head trauma or injury.
- Brain tumors.
- Sleep apnea.

Mild cognitive impairment, or MCI, is the name given to memory loss that is not severe enough to interrupt daily life. While MCI can be caused by treatable health problems, it can also be an early stage of dementia. Many with MCI do not seek medical care because they are still able to carry out daily tasks and live independently. However, it is important to see a doctor if you think you have MCI. One in three cases of MCI may be caused by a treatable condition.

Dementia
Dementia is not a disease; it is the name for a wide range of symptoms and disorders related to loss of memory or thinking skills. Unlike MCI, these symptoms do impact a person's daily life. Many health problems can cause dementia, including stroke.

Often, dementia starts slowly and gets worse over time. It may affect a person's ability to work and keep close relationships. While symptoms vary, dementia can impact other behavioral or psychiatric symptoms such as personality, socially inappropriate behaviors, apathy, hallucinations, delusions and paranoia. Communication and language, focus and attention span, reasoning and judgment, and visual perception can also be affected by dementia.

Alzheimer's disease
According to the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia in people 65 and older. It affects more than 5 million Americans. It slowly and gradually destroys a person's ability to remember, think and lead a normal life. It cannot be reversed.
Symptoms often first appear after age 60. The biggest risk factors for Alzheimer's are age, family history and history of serious concussion. Memory loss from Alzheimer's disease is severe, causing many with the disease to lose their independence. The rate at which Alzheimer's disease advances varies from person to person.

When to seek medical help
Memory loss is frustrating, but everyday forgetfulness is not always a serious problem. To determine when to seek medical help, consider how often problems occur and if they are getting worse. It is time to see a doctor when your problems get worse and start to affect your daily life. This may include problems with language, sense of direction, or a change in personality or behavior. Consider the following when deciding whether to seek medical help:

- **Is memory loss affecting your daily life?** Forgetting to pay bills or leaving a stove on could be cause for concern.
- **Has your mood or personality changed for the worse?** Sudden speech or physical outbursts and depression can be the first symptoms of brain damage.
- **How often do memory problems occur?** If memory loss is getting worse and more frequent, then it may be time to seek help.
- **What kinds of things do you forget?** It may be normal to forget details of a conversation. But forgetting entire conversations may be a sign of a problem.

- **Have you been told you repeat yourself or ask the same questions in the same conversation?** If you are being told this more frequently, this could be a cause for concern.
- **Have you experienced confusion with time or place?** Getting lost in a familiar place or missing appointments could be a cause for concern.
- **Has there been a change in social interactions?** Withdrawal from work or social activities can signal a problem.

Memory loss assessment
Memory loss can place you at risk for other health problems. See your primary care doctor the first time symptoms cause concern for you or a caregiver. To determine if your memory loss can be reversed, your doctor may do:

- Medical history and physical exam.
- Neurological exam (testing balance and reflexes).
- Mental status exam (questions about current events, date and time).
- Blood and urine tests.
- Computed tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) brain scan if brain damage is suspected.

Be sure to ask your doctor any questions you may have, even if you feel like you are repeating yourself. Be sure to bring a loved one with you to the appointment and have that person write down what you discuss. Your doctor will have many questions for you and a loved one, possibly including:

- How long have you had memory problems?
- How often do you have them?
- What types of things have you been forgetting?
- What types of symptoms have you been having? In what order do you have them?
- What medicines and dose do you take regularly?
- Have you started taking a new medicine?
- Do you have a hard time doing or completing tasks?
- Do you drink alcohol? How much?
- Have you been in an accident? Did you fall or hurt your head?

Research opportunities
There are many research studies on memory loss and management that people can join. To find out if there is one near you, visit these websites:

- The Alzheimer's Cooperative Study Group: [www.adcs.org](http://www.adcs.org)
- Alzheimer's Association Trial Match: [www.alz.org/research/clinical_trials/find_clinical_trials_trialmatch.asp](http://www.alz.org/research/clinical_trials/find_clinical_trials_trialmatch.asp)
- National Institutes of Health: [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov)
• Have you been sick recently?
• Have you recently had sudden mood or personality changes?
• Are you having serious change or stress in your life?
• Are you sleeping well?
• What is your daily routine? How has it changed?

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist. These doctors can further help diagnose a memory problem:

• Neurologist: treats disorders of the brain and nervous system.
• Psychiatrist: treats mental problems that impact mood or the way the mind works.
• Psychologist: has special training in testing memory and other mental functions.
• Geriatrician: specializes in the care of older adults and diseases related to aging.
• Genetic counselor: Some genes are associated with Alzheimer’s disease. A genetic counselor can help decide if genetic testing is right for you and explain the results.

**Treatment and care**

Memory loss treatment depends on the cause. Each patient needs an individualized care plan. If you have a reversible form of memory loss, your doctor can often offer a treatment plan to improve symptoms. Treatments include lifestyle changes such as diet, memory training, speech and occupational therapy.

Most progressive types of dementia, such as Alzheimer’s disease, have no cure and no treatment to stop them. Drug treatments may temporarily improve symptoms and daily life.

If you or a loved one has a severe form of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, it is important to follow your doctor’s advice. Your doctor can help track your progress, reassess treatment plans, refer you to specialists and answer your questions.

**Living with memory loss**

If you have memory loss, here are some ways to cope and stay mentally sharp:

• Keep a checklist and calendar of daily reminders. You can use a pen and paper or your smart device. Put it in a convenient place, where you can look at it often during the day.
• Take on one task at a time and avoid distractions. Limit multitasking.
• Get plenty of rest.
• Avoid stressful activities.
• Make time in your day for physical activity. This will help improve mental awareness.
• Exercise your brain. Solve crosswords or puzzles. Learn a new language or musical instrument. Start a new hobby.
• Return commonly used items, such as car keys or a cellphone, to the same place so they will be easy to find.
• Reduce clutter.
• Store important phone numbers in your cellphone. Or keep a list next to your home phone.
• Ask your family and friends for help.

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**Memory and aging program at UK HealthCare**

Your doctor may refer you to the Memory Disorders Clinic in the Kentucky Neuroscience Institute. Our multidisciplinary team will evaluate your memory loss and offer treatment advice to you, your family and referring doctor.

The comprehensive evaluation process takes time and effort. However, our careful consideration of many factors helps us reach a diagnosis and treatment options that are best for each patient. Once the evaluation is completed, you can return to seeing the referring doctor.

The Memory Disorders Clinic is part of the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center and the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging. The clinic offers promising new research for patients with dementias that are sometimes considered untreatable. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call 800-333-8874 or 859-257-1000 or visit ukhealthcare.uky.edu/kni/memory.
Helping a loved one with memory loss

Unfortunately, it may be hard to convince a loved one with memory loss to seek medical help. Here are some tips to help.

- Have a doctor or other professional try to persuade your loved one to seek medical help.
- Schedule a visit with the family doctor about another issue. It can be for yourself or for your loved one. Once at the doctor's office, this is a chance to bring up your loved one’s memory problems. Be sure to talk with the doctor before the visit to get as much help as possible.
- Health care privacy laws can make it hard to get information about your loved one. If you go with your loved one to a doctor's visit, your loved one can grant permission for the doctor to share information with you. Again, speak to the doctor's office ahead of time to plan ahead.
- Ask family and friends to help. There are also voluntary organizations and professional services that can assist caregivers. See the resources section of this for more information.

Managing a diagnosis

A person with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease can have a different level of memory loss from day to day. This means they can have good days and bad days. As a caregiver, you need to be flexible and adapt to your loved one’s needs. Be involved in their care by helping them at doctor's visits. At the doctor's office:

- Ask for tips to communicate with your loved one at home.
- Work with the doctor to know what to expect and ask questions for clarification. Are more tests needed? Would a referral to another doctor be best? Are all these medicines really needed?
- Ask where you can find guidance and resources for support.

• Ask for a referral to a social worker to help match your needs to those in the community.

Adult daycares or respite services can ease the demands of caregiving. They give you a break while knowing that your loved one is being cared for. Other important matters to consider are organizing financial and legal documents, assigning power of attorney, investigating long-term care options, and determining what services are covered by health insurance and Medicare.

Resources about memory loss

National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov

Alzheimer’s Association
www.alz.org

Family Caregiver Alliance
www.caregiver.org.

UK HealthCare

UK HealthCare offers comprehensive care for memory loss. To schedule an appointment or to learn more, call toll-free 800-333-8874 or 859-257-1000. Visit us on the web at ukhealthcare.uky.edu.