

Memory Loss With Aging

What's normal, what's not

How does the brain store information?

The brain stores information in your *memory*. The information in your memory includes things that have happened to you in the past—what you've seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt.

Things are stored in different parts of your memory depending on when they happened to you. Information stored in the *short-term memory* may include the name of a person you met moments ago or a phone number you just looked up.

Information stored in the *recent memory* may include what you ate for breakfast or what you did yesterday.

Information stored in the *remote memory* includes things that you stored in your memory years ago, such as memories of childhood, what you wore on your wedding day or the color of the first car you bought.

How does aging change the brain?

Beginning when you're very young, your brain starts to change. You begin to lose brain cells a few at a time. Your body also starts to make less of the chemicals your brain cells need to work. The older you are, the more these changes can affect your memory.

Aging may affect memory by changing the way you store information. It may also affect memory by making it harder to recall information the brain has already stored.

Your short-term and remote memories aren't usually affected by aging. But your recent memory may be affected. You may need more time to make decisions. You may forget names of people you've met recently. These are normal changes.

What about when I know a word but can't recall it?

This is called a "tip-of-the-tongue" experience. It's usually just a glitch in your memory. You'll almost always remember the word with time. This may become more common as you age. It can be very frustrating. But don't worry. It's not serious unless it interferes with your daily activities.

Things to help you remember

- Keep lists.
- Follow a routine.
- Make *associations* (connect things in your mind), such as using landmarks to help you get around.
- Keep a detailed calendar.
- Put important items, such as your keys, in the same place every time.
- Repeat names when you meet new people.
- Do things that keep your mind and body busy.
- Run through the ABC's in your head to help you think of words you're having trouble remembering. "Hearing" the first letter of a word may jog your memory.

What are other causes of memory problems?

Many things other than aging can cause memory problems. These include depression, other illnesses, *dementia* (severe problems with memory and thinking, such as Alzheimer's disease), side effects of drugs, strokes, head injury and alcoholism. Hearing and vision problems can add to memory problems by making communication hard.

How can I tell if memory problems are serious?

A memory problem is serious when it affects your daily living. If you sometimes forget names, you're probably okay. But you may have a more serious problem if you have trouble remembering how to do things you've done many times before, getting from one place you've been to often to another place, or doing things that use steps, like following a recipe.

The difference between normal memory problems and dementia is that the memory loss that normally occurs with aging doesn't get much worse over time. Dementia gets much worse over a period of several months to several years.

It may be hard to figure out on your own if you have a serious problem. Talk to your family doctor about any concerns you have. Your doctor may be able to help you if your memory problems are caused by a medicine you're taking or by depression. Many causes of memory problems can be treated.

How does Alzheimer's disease change memory?

Alzheimer's disease starts by changing the recent memory—the ability to learn and store new information. At first, a person with Alzheimer's disease will remember even small details of his or her distant past but not be able to remember recent events or conversations. Over time, the disease affects all parts of the memory. The person with Alzheimer's disease will no longer be able to care for his or her own needs.

Alzheimer's disease isn't a normal part of aging and it's much less common than most people think. Only 10% of people over age 65 have Alzheimer's disease. But this number rises to 20% to 30% of people over age 85.

Memory problems that aren't a part of normal aging

- Forgetting things much more often than you used to
- Forgetting how to do things you've done many times before
- Trouble learning new things
- Repeating phrases or stories in the same conversation
- Trouble making choices or handling money
- Not being able to keep track of what happens each day
- Changes in how you act
- Loss of social graces
- Losing interest in daily activities and how you look
- Feeling more depressed, confused, restless and anxious



If you want more information about memory loss, you can call the National Institute on Aging at 301-496-1752. For more information about Alzheimer's disease, you can call the Alzheimer's Association at 800-272-3900.



This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

The American Academy of Family Physicians, one of the nation's largest medical specialty groups, is committed to promoting and maintaining high standards for family doctors—the doctors who give ongoing, comprehensive care to people of all ages.

© 1994, 1995, 1996 American Academy of Family Physicians
8880 Ward Parkway, Kansas City, MO 64114-2797
<http://www.aafp.org>



Permission is granted to reproduce this material for nonprofit educational uses. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.

This health education material has been favorably reviewed by the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation.