

Understanding Memory Loss

Like all parts of the body, the brain works differently as a person ages. However, there is a difference between normal aging and Alzheimer's disease. Every case of Alzheimer's disease is different, but experts have identified common warning signs. Contact your doctor with concerns.

Area of Concern	Normal Aging	Possible Indicator of Alzheimer's Disease or Other Dementia
Memory Loss	Temporarily forget names or where you left your keys	Difficulty remembering familiar names, places or recent or important events.
Disorientation	Forget the day of the week or why you entered a room.	Get lost on your own street or forget where you are and how to get home.
Challenged by familiar mental tasks	Make a mistake when balancing a checkbook.	Unable to complete tasks that may be familiar to you, such as following a recipe.
Difficulty completing activities of daily living	Sometimes need assistance with an electronic device.	Need assistance with getting dressed or using the phone.
Trouble using words appropriately	Occasionally struggle to find the right word.	Difficulty completing sentences and following directions/conversations.
Poor judgement	Make questionable or debatable decisions at times	Unsure how to dress; or gives money to solicitors excessively.
Changes in mood and personality	Fatigued by obligations or irritable when routine is disrupted.	Increased suspicion, withdrawal and disinterest.

How Alzheimer's Disease is Diagnosed

If you are concerned about changes in memory and thinking or changes in senses, behavior, mood, or movement that do not seem normal in yourself or a family member, talk with a doctor.

To diagnose Alzheimer's, doctors may:

- ◆ Ask the person and a family member or friend questions about overall health, past medical problems, ability to carry out daily activities, and changes in behavior and personality.
- ◆ Conduct tests of memory, problem solving, attention, counting, and language.
- ◆ Carry out standard medical tests, such as blood and urine tests, to identify other possible causes of the problem.
- ◆ Perform brain scans, such as computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), or positron emission tomography (PET), to rule out other possible causes for symptoms.

These tests may be repeated to give doctors information about how the person's memory and other cognitive functions are changing over time. Tests can also help diagnose other causes of memory problems, such as mild cognitive impairment and vascular dementia.

If a primary care doctor suspects mild cognitive impairment or possible Alzheimer's, he or she may refer you to a specialist who can provide a detailed diagnosis, or you may decide to go to a specialist for further assessment.

Specialists include:

- ◆ Geriatricians, who manage health care in older adults. They know how the body changes as it ages and whether symptoms indicate a serious problem.
- ◆ Geriatric psychiatrists, who specialize in the mental and emotional problems of older adults and can assess memory and thinking problems.
- ◆ Neurologists, who specialize in abnormalities of the brain and central nervous system and can conduct and review brain scans.
- ◆ Neuropsychologists, who can conduct tests of memory and thinking.

Early, accurate diagnosis is beneficial for several reasons. Beginning treatment early in the disease process may help preserve daily functioning for some time, even though the underlying Alzheimer's process cannot be stopped or reversed.

Having an early diagnosis helps people with Alzheimer's and their families:

- ◆ Plan for the future.
- ◆ Take care of financial and legal matters.
- ◆ Address potential safety issues.
- ◆ Learn about living arrangements.
- ◆ Develop support networks.

In addition, an early diagnosis gives people greater opportunities to participate in clinical trials that are testing possible new treatments for Alzheimer's disease or other research studies.

Source: www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/topics/diagnosis