



Aging and Memory: *Am I Normal or Should I Check this Out?*



Most of us begin to notice mild changes in our cognition, our ability to think, by our 50s and 60s. Memory, speed of processing information, multi-tasking, attention and concentration may seem less acute than before. We feel less sharp. This can feel unnerving: forgetting people's names, finding more checkbook errors, missing appointments, grasping for the right word. The question we ask ourselves: Is this just my busy life? Is this normal? Or is this the beginning of the big D word? Dementia.

What is Dementia?

Dementia is the general term that is used for a decline in cognition, such as in memory, thinking, and communication, that is caused by brain pathology due to a disease process. There are many types of dementia, not just the Alzheimer's type, some of which may be treated and/or controlled through medical care, especially if caught early. Cerebrovascular disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and sleep apnea can contribute to brain cell loss.

Don't Be Afraid of Normal Decline

Most importantly, you can expect to experience normal decline in cognition as you age. For example, your legs may work fine, but at the age of 60, you may not be able to sprint as quickly or as efficiently as a 16 year old. This does not mean your legs have a disease. It just means you have the legs of a 60 year old. Of course, depending on how well you have taken care of yourself over the years, your ability to run at the age of 60 will vary. Likewise, how you care for yourself over the span of your lifetime also impacts your brain health. Your mild brain blips in thinking may just be the normal, benign forgetting of aging.

Ask Yourself

To help determine if your lapses in memory or forgetfulness are real problems, ask yourself the following questions:

- 1. Am I often disoriented to time or place or day?**
- 2. Do I frequently forget important names or dates, and once reminded, still have a hard time remembering?**

- 3. Am I having a harder time managing my finances and would I rather avoid them?**
- 4. Do people tell me that I keep asking the same question?**
- 5. Do I get lost in familiar places and have a harder than usual time with directions?**
- 6. Do I have more episodes of forgetting to turn off the oven, stove, or water faucet?**
- 7. Do I avoid social activities, travel, and meeting people?**
- 8. Am I confused and more uncomfortable in new or strange places?**
- 9. Do I have a harder time making decisions, making plans or solving problems?**
- 10. Are my family members, loved ones, or friends commenting about changes in my functioning or behavior?**

These are just signs and should not be used alone to diagnose dementia. Importantly, if there is a **SIGNIFICANT CHANGE** in functioning you should contact your Primary Care Physician. Many of these signs can also be found in other disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress, Lyme disease, multiple sclerosis, lupus, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, or Long Covid.

Brain Hygiene

Although research is still preliminary as to the effectiveness of protective factors for brain health, there are several activities and practices that are being identified as important for keeping brains healthy. Below are 11 Brain Hygiene tips. Check with your primary care physician to be sure all of these tips are right for you:

- 1. Maintain a healthy, balanced diet to fuel the brain including vitamins and nutrients, rich in Omega 3 fatty acids and Magnesium, which have been shown to support healthy neurons.**
- 2. Keep yourself hydrated! The brain needs fluids and balanced electrolytes to function.**

- 3. Avoid overuse of alcohol which can impair and damage brain cells.**
- 4. Get plenty of sleep and be sure to address any sleep apnea issues to avoid chronic lack of oxygen to the brain.**
- 5. Treat medical conditions that affect blood flow to the brain, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. Consult your physician to reduce your stroke risk.**
- 6. Engage in a reasonable, regular physical exercise routine to oxygenate your brain and to keep muscles flexible and strong and improves your balance to prevent falls.**
- 7. Exercise your brain by learning new tasks, skills, games, and hobbies. Cross-training the brain helps keep it sharp.**
- 8. Stay socially active and engaged. Spend time with family and friends to support your emotional health and increase social support.**
- 9. Engage in meditation, mindfulness training, and activities such as yoga to de-stress. Reducing stress helps the immune system fight disease and keep cognitive abilities sharp.**
- 10. Accept yourself. None of us is perfect and carrying around old anxieties, feelings of guilt, or fear of disappointing others is only self-destructive. If you are having a hard time feeling at peace with yourself, you may benefit from seeking the services of a psychologist to help you find tools to remove the barriers to your emotional wellness.**
- 11. You might consider *baseline neuropsychological testing*. This type of paper-pencil and computerized testing measures cognitive skills BEFORE there is a change or concern about mental functioning. It can provide reassurance of normal aging and is helpful for later comparison if in the future you sustain a brain injury, perhaps from a motor vehicle accident or fall, or experience a stroke or other brain disease or disorder.**

So, remember to expect normal aging of your brain and to take active steps to keep it healthy.

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