

Forgetfulness: When to Ask for Help



Mild forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging.

Many people worry about becoming forgetful. They think forgetfulness is the first sign of Alzheimer's disease.

Over the past few years, scientists have learned a lot about memory and why some kinds of memory problems are serious but others are not.

Age-Related Changes in Memory

Changes occur in all parts of the body with age, including the brain. For some it takes longer to learn new things, they have trouble retaining information, or they lose things like their glasses. These are usually signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems. Some older adults struggle with complex memory or learning tests. Scientists have found, though, that given enough time, healthy older people can do as well as younger people can on these tests. In fact, as they age, healthy adults usually improve in areas of mental ability such as vocabulary.

Health-Related Changes in Memory

Some health-related memory problems may be treatable. For example, medication side effects, vitamin B12 deficiency, chronic alcoholism, tumors or infections in the brain, or blood clots in the brain can cause memory loss or confusion. Some thyroid, kidney, or liver disorders also can lead to disorientation and forgetfulness.

Emotional-Related Changes in Memory

Stress, anxiety, or depression, can also make a person more forgetful and can be mistaken for dementia. For instance, someone who has recently retired or who is coping with the death of a spouse may feel sad or lonely. The confusion and forgetfulness caused by emotions usually are temporary and lessen once healthy coping mechanisms are in place. Emotional concerns can be eased by supportive friends and family, but if these feelings last for a long time, it is important to get help from a doctor or counselor. Treatment may include counseling, medication, or both.

Normal Aging vs. Alzheimer's Disease

Normal Aging	Alzheimer's Disease
Making a bad decision once in a while	Making poor judgments and decisions
Missing a monthly payment	Problems taking care of monthly bills
Forgetting which day it is and remembering it later	Losing track of the date or time of year
Sometimes forgetting which word to use	Trouble having a conversation
Losing things from time to time	Misplacing things often and being unable to find them
Not being able to remember the name of an acquaintance	Not recognizing or knowing the names of family members

If you have concerns about your memory, contact Alzheimer's San Diego. Memory Screenings are offered monthly and our team of social workers are able to answer any questions you may have.