Coping With Memory Loss

Everyone has mild memory lapses from time to time. You can’t find your car keys one day, and your reading glasses go missing the next.

These are usually just signs of a normal brain that’s constantly prioritizing, sorting, storing, and retrieving all types of information. But how do you know when memory loss is abnormal – and should be evaluated by a health care professional? Here are some questions to consider:

- **Does the memory loss disrupt daily living**, such as driving, balancing a checkbook, and maintaining personal hygiene?
- **How often do memory lapses occur?** It’s one thing to forget where you parked your car once in a while, but it’s not normal to regularly forget your assigned parking spot or to miss appointments over and over. Frequent memory lapses are likely to be noticeable because they tend to interfere with daily living.
- **What’s being forgotten?** Most people have trouble remembering some details of a conversation, but forgetting whole conversations could signal a problem. Other red flags: forgetting the name of a close friend or relative, frequently repeating yourself or asking the same questions in the same conversation.
- **Are there signs of confusion?** Serious memory lapses may cause individuals to get lost in a familiar place or put something in an inappropriate place because they can’t remember where it goes (think car keys in the refrigerator).
- **Is the memory loss getting worse?** If you feel you’re forgetting more and more over time, you should be evaluated by a health professional.

**What Causes Memory Loss?**

Anything that affects cognition—the process of thinking, learning, and remembering—can affect memory. Doctors use a combination of strategies to gain better insight into what’s going on, says Ranjit Mani, M.D., a neurologist in FDA’s Division of Neurology Products.

Doctors evaluate memory loss by taking a medical history, asking questions to test mental ability, conducting a physical and neurological examination, and performing blood and urine tests. Brain imaging – either using computerized axial tomography (CAT) scans or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) – can help to identify strokes and tumors, which can sometimes cause memory loss.

“The goal is to rule out factors that are potentially reversible and determine if the memory loss is due to a more serious brain disease,” Mani says.

Some causes of memory loss can occur together or individually:

- **Medications** that can interfere with memory include over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription sleeping pills, OTC...
antihistamines, anti-anxiety medications, antidepressants, some drugs used to treat schizophrenia, and pain medicines used after surgery.

- **Heavy alcohol use** can cause deficiencies in vitamin B1 (thiamine), which can harm memory. Alcohol and illicit drugs can change chemicals in the brain and affect memory.

- **Stress**, particularly because of emotional trauma, can cause memory loss. In rare, extreme cases, a condition called psychogenic amnesia can result. “This can cause someone to wander around lost, unable to remember their name or date of birth or other basic information,” Mani says. “It usually resolves on its own.”

- **Depression**, which is common with aging, causes a lack of attention and focus that can affect memory. "Usually treating the depression will improve mood, and the memory problems may then also improve," Mani says.

- **A blow to the head** can cause a loss of consciousness and memory loss. “Memory loss from a single episode of head trauma typically stays the same or gradually gets better, but not worse,” Mani says. However, repeated head trauma, as in boxers and footballers can result in progressive loss of memory and other effects.

- **People with HIV, tuberculosis, syphilis, herpes, and other infections of the lining or substance of the brain may experience memory problems.**

- **An underactive or overactive thyroid** can interfere with remembering recent events.

- **Lack of quality sleep** can affect memory.

- **Deficiencies of vitamins B1 and B12 can affect memory**, and can be treated with a pill or an injection.

As part of the normal aging process, it can be harder for some people to recall some types of information, such as the names of individuals.

Mild cognitive impairment, however, is a condition characterized by a memory deficit beyond that expected for age, but is not sufficient to impair day-to-day activities.

The most serious form of memory loss is dementia. With dementia, there is increasing impairment of memory and other aspects of thinking that are sufficiently severe to impair daily activities. While this has many causes, the most common by far is Alzheimer’s disease, in which there is a progressive loss of brain cells accompanied by other abnormalities of the brain.

**Can Memory Loss Be Prevented?**

Clinical trials are underway to test specific interventions for memory loss. Research has shown that the combination of shifting estrogen and progestin levels increased the risk of dementia in women older than 65. There is no evidence that the herb ginkgo biloba prevents memory loss.

But still, there are some things you can do that might help reduce the risk of developing memory problems:

- Lower your cholesterol and blood pressure. Several studies in recent years have suggested that vascular diseases (heart disease and stroke) that result from elevated cholesterol and blood pressure may contribute to the development of Alzheimer’s disease, its severity, or the development of multi-infarct dementia (also called vascular dementia).

- **Don’t smoke or abuse alcohol.**

- **Get regular exercise.** Physical activity may help maintain blood flow to the brain and reduce risk factors associated with dementia.

- **Maintain healthy eating habits.** Eating more green leafy vegetables and less saturated fats has been shown to help slow cognitive decline. Also, eating fish with beneficial omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon and tuna, may benefit brain health.

- **Maintain social interactions,** which can help reduce stress.

- **Keep your brain active.** Some experts suggest that challenging the brain with such activities as reading, writing, learning a new skill, playing games, and gardening stimulates brain cells and the connections between the cells, and may be associated with a lower risk of dementia. FDA