

Memory Loss and Aging- What's "Normal"?

We've all seen one or had one – senior moments - those momentary lapses when you blank on a word you've used a thousand times; you go to the grocery store and forget why you went; or you lose track of where you put your car keys...

Often, you can blame stress or sleep deprivation for playing these tricks on your brain. But when should you become concerned?

Just like the rest of our bodies, our brains change as we age. However, serious memory loss and confusion may be a sign that normal brain cells are failing.

The brain has 100 billion nerve cells (neurons). Each nerve cell communicates with many others to form networks. Some of these networks are involved in thinking, learning and remembering. Disease can short circuit these networks – slowing them or interrupting them entirely. Alzheimer's is one of those diseases.

Alzheimer's disease is a disorder of the brain. It is the most common form of dementia: a general term for the loss of memory and other intellectual abilities serious enough to interfere with daily life. Alzheimer's is a progressive disease; it worsens over time. It is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States.

The exact cause of this disease is not known, but both genetics and environmental influences appear to be important.

Certain factors are associated with an increased incidence of Alzheimer's:

- **Age:** The risk of developing Alzheimer's disease increases with age. According to the Alzheimer's Association, 10% of all people over the age of 65 have Alzheimer's disease, and as many as 50% of people over 85 have microscopic brain changes consistent with Alzheimer's.
- **Gender:** Alzheimer's disease affects women more frequently than men.
- **Family History:** Less than 1% of Alzheimer's disease cases are inherited. Of these, most have early onset of disease - before age 65.
- **Down's Syndrome:** People with Down's syndrome often develop Alzheimer's disease in their 30's and 40's. We do not know why.
- **Environmental Exposures:** Some studies associate Alzheimer's with exposure of patients on dialysis to aluminum containing compounds.
- **Other Factors:** New research suggests that high cholesterol levels and high blood pressure may also increase the risk for developing Alzheimer's.

As many as 5 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's disease. At present, there is no conclusive test for Alzheimer's disease in patients. The brain cells of Alzheimer's patients at autopsy show characteristic microscopic changes. Clinical features of the disorder lead to a reliable diagnosis in almost all cases, however.

Inattentiveness or distraction cause occasional lapses of memory, and these lapses are of no concern. Symptoms that suggest a more serious problem include:

- Consistently forgetting familiar things
- Asking the same questions over and over again
- Becoming lost in places you know well
- Not being able to follow directions
- Getting very confused about time, people, and places
- Disregard for personal care
- Unsafe or inappropriate behavior
- Marked changes in personality

Remember, Alzheimer's disease affects many brain functions, not just memory.

These symptoms should prompt a visit to a doctor. Medications, given early, can help slow the progression of Alzheimer's and may enable people to carry out their daily activities and independent living for a longer period of time. There are also medicines available to help manage some of the most troubling symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, including depression and behavioral problems such as agitation and aggression.

There are no proven measures that prevent Alzheimer's disease. A healthy life style, prudent diet, regular exercise and periodic medical assessments by a physician will help to avoid other illnesses that may contribute to cognitive decline. Some studies suggest that "exercising" our brains can improve memory and thinking skills. Reading books and periodicals, doing crossword puzzles, even playing trivia games or checkers exercise our "mental muscles"; so does the pursuit of hobbies and personal interests.

Care of the Alzheimer's patient benefits from a team approach: a team that includes family, physician, health care agencies, and community support services. Talk with your doctor for more information.