

## Dementia and memory loss

One of the main symptoms of dementia is memory loss. We all forget things from time to time, but the loss of memory with dementia is different. It is persistent and progressive, not just occasional. It may affect a person's ability to continue to work or carry out familiar tasks. It may mean having difficulty finding the way home. Eventually it may mean forgetting how to dress or how to bathe.

An example of normal forgetfulness is walking into the kitchen and forgetting what you went in there for or misplacing the car keys. The person with dementia, however, may lose the car keys and then forget what they are used for.

### Normal forgetfulness

Some key points about normal forgetfulness include:

- As we get older, the most common change that we complain about is memory change.
- Memory change associated with healthy ageing doesn't interfere with everyday life in any dramatic way.
- Everyone is different and the effect of getting older on memory is different for each person.
- Recent research describes the effect of getting older on:
  - Attention processes
  - The ability to get new information into storage
  - The time it takes to recall things
  - 'Tip of the tongue' experience.
- Research also suggests that immediate memory and lifetime memory do not change as we get older.

### Keeping your brain fit and your memory sharp

As yet, there is no prevention or cure for dementia. However, here are a few tips for keeping your brain fit and your memory sharp:

- **Avoid harmful substances** – excessive drinking and drug misuse damage brain cells.
- **Challenge yourself** – read widely, keep mentally active and learn new skills to strengthen brain connections and promote new ones.
- **Trust yourself more** – if people feel they have control over their lives, their brain chemistry actually improves.
- **Relax** – tension may prolong a memory lapse.
- **Pay attention** – concentrate on what you want to remember.
- Minimise and resist distractions.
- **Use a notepad and carry a calendar** – this may not keep the memory sharp, but does compensate for memory problems.
- Take your time.
- **Organise belongings** – use a special place for 'unforgettables', such as car keys and glasses.
- **Repeat names** of new acquaintances in conversation.

### Debunking memory myths

Some popular myths exist about ageing and memory. The facts tell a different story.

#### Myth

Forgetfulness is a sign that something is wrong with your brain.

### **Fact**

If we didn't possess the capacity to forget, we'd all go crazy. The ability to remember what is important and discard the rest is a skill to be treasured.

### **Myth**

You lose 10,000 brain cells every day and then, one day, you just run out.

### **Fact**

This is an exaggerated fear. Some parts of the brain do lose nerve cells, but not where the process of thinking takes place. You lose some nerve connections, but it's possible to grow new ones or maintain the connections you have by exercising your mind.

### **Myth**

Compare yourself to others to tell if your memory is normal.

### **Fact**

A huge range of ability exists across the general population. Even a single individual experiences variations in memory over the course of a lifetime. Just as certain people have a talent for music and others do not, some of us are naturally gifted at various types of remembering.

## **Dementia causes progressive and consistent memory loss**

There is a difference between memory loss as a normal part of ageing and as a symptom of dementia. Memory loss in a person with dementia is persistent and progressive, not just occasional, and may progress through a number of changes:

- **Events** – the person may forget part or all of an event.
- **Words or names** – the person progressively forgets words and names of people and things.
- **Written and verbal directions** – the person progressively loses the ability to follow directions.
- **Stories on TV, in movies or books** – the person progressively loses the ability to follow stories.
- **Stored knowledge** – over time, the person loses known information such as historical or political information.
- **Everyday skills** – the person may progressively lose the capacity to perform tasks such as dressing and cooking.

## **Support for families and carers**

Dealing with dementia-related behaviours day in and day out is not easy. It is essential that you seek support for yourself from an understanding family member, a friend, a professional or a support group. Remember that you are not alone. Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling through the National Dementia Helpline.

The Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service (DBMAS) is a national telephone advisory service established to support carers and care workers of people with dementia who experience dementia-related behaviours. Telephone advice, assessment, intervention, education and specialised support are available 24 hours a day.

## **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Your local community health service
- Your local council
- National Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service Tel. 1800 699 799 – for telephone advice, assessment, intervention, education and specialised support (24 hours)
- National Dementia Helpline Tel. 1800 100 500
- Commonwealth Carer Respite Centre Tel. 1800 059 059
- Carer Resource Centres Tel. 1800 242 636
- Aged Care Assessment Services – contact your regional Department of Human Services office
- Aged Care Information Line Tel. 1800 500 853
- The Cognitive Dementia and Memory Service (CDAMS)

## Things to remember

- There is a difference between memory loss as a normal part of ageing and as a symptom of dementia.
- Memory loss with dementia is persistent and progressive, not just occasional.
- There are some things you can do to help keep your memory sharp.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Alzheimer's Australia Victoria

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