



Memory Loss

Protecting Your Mind
and Coping With Concerns



PR•MED
Patient Education Center

www.patientedu.org

“Losing it” is a dreaded complication of aging. Doctors are a long way from solving the problem, but new research is offering hope for prevention and help for patients and caregivers who share the burden.

Minding Your Mind

Here are 12 tips to help keep your mind sharp as you age:

- 1** Get mental stimulation. Read, do word puzzles, and try crafts. Do whatever you find interesting and—above all—new.
- 2** Get physical exercise. A 30-minute walk every day will protect your brain.
- 3** Eat right. Keep your calories down. Load up on fruits, vegetables, and fish. Cut down on saturated and trans fats and salt.
- 4** Improve your blood pressure. Hypertension causes strokes and memory loss.
- 5** Improve your blood sugar. Diabetes is also a major risk factor.
- 6** Improve your cholesterol. It will protect the arteries that bring vital oxygen to your brain.
- 7** Avoid tobacco. It’s the most important way to prevent disease.

For more information about memory loss from Harvard Health Publications, go to www.patientedu.org.

8 Don’t abuse alcohol. People who enjoy one or two drinks a day may actually reduce their risk of memory loss—but people who drink heavily are courting disaster.

9 Consider low-dose aspirin. Some evidence suggests that long-term use of aspirin and other anti-inflammatory drugs may reduce the risk of memory loss. Ask your doctor if a baby aspirin a day is right for you.

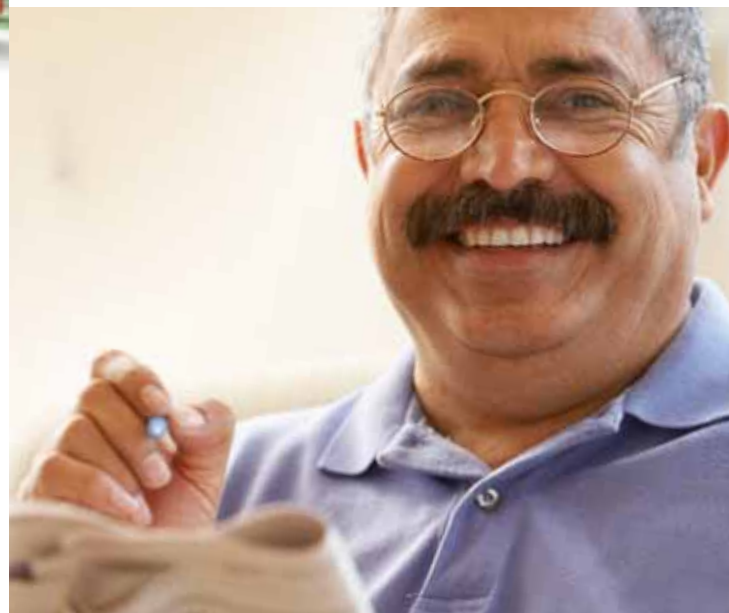


10 Care for your emotions. Stress, depression, and sleep deprivation impair mental function.



11 Protect your head. Head injuries increase the risk of memory loss.

12 Build social networks. People are good medicine.

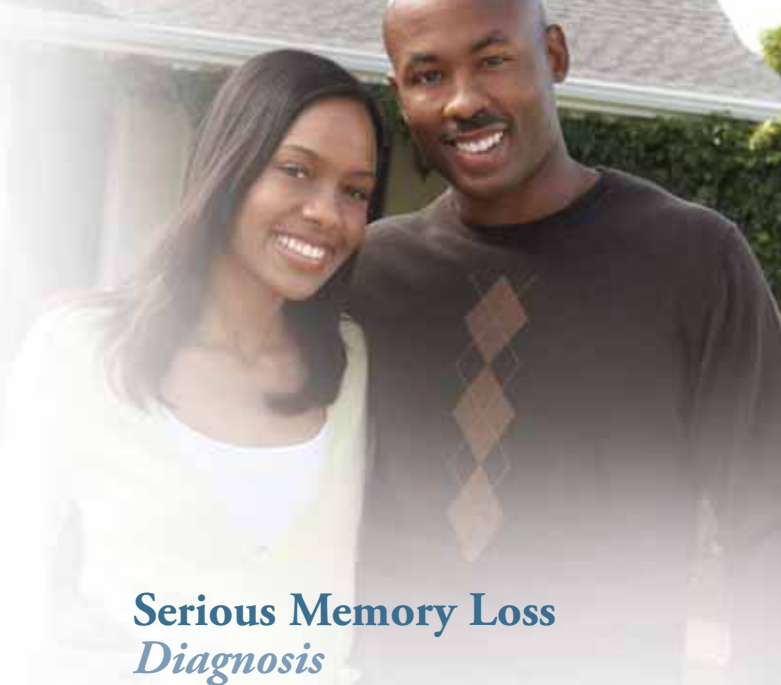


Memory Lapses or Memory Losses?

As we age, memory lapses become common. It's annoying to forget where you put your keys, but it's quite normal. But if you forget what a key is for or how to use it, you may have what doctors call *dementia*. Here are some differences between normal memory lapses and worrisome memory losses.

Normal Memory Lapses	Worrisome Memory Losses
You are worried about your memory, but your relatives are not.	Relatives are concerned, but patient is not aware of the problem.
You remember the incidents of memory losses.	Patient does not remember the events.
You have occasional difficulty finding words or remembering names.	Patient demonstrates frequent pauses and substitutions when finding words.
You remember important recent events.	Patient forgets important things.
You remain interested in people and your social skills are intact.	Patient becomes withdrawn or behaves inappropriately.
You can function independently.	Patient grows dependent on others for activities of daily life.
You don't get lost in familiar territory, though you may have to pause to find your way.	Patient gets lost while driving or walking; may take hours to get home.

Serious memory loss is usually identified by a relative or friend.



Serious Memory Loss *Diagnosis*

Your doctors will check your general health, including your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, thyroid, and vitamin B₁₂ levels. They'll review your medications to see if you are taking antihistamines, sedatives, pain relievers, or other drugs that can slow mental processes. You'll take a mental status test, and in many cases, you'll have a CT or MRI to produce images of your brain.

Serious Memory Loss *Causes*

Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause, is characterized by deposits of a protein (beta-amyloid) in critical areas of the brain. As the disease progresses, the patient's memory and judgment decline, and behavioral problems such as wandering and aggression often develop. There are no specific tests for Alzheimer's, nor are there any ways to remove beta-amyloid, but scientists are working hard on these problems.



The second leading cause of severe memory loss is vascular dementia, which develops from blockages in small arteries in the brain. In advanced cases, the memory loss is as severe as in Alzheimer's, but behavioral problems are less likely.

Other causes include Lewy body disease, Parkinson's disease, alcohol, and certain infections.

Serious Memory Loss

Treatment

It's important for you to improve your general health, especially your blood pressure and cholesterol.

Drugs called *cholinesterase inhibitors* are approved for mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. *Donepezil*, *rivastigmine*, and *galatamine* are safe drugs that may cause occasional diarrhea or nausea.

Memantine is a newer drug that's approved for moderate to severe Alzheimer's, either alone or in combination with a cholinesterase inhibitor. Dizziness is the most common side effect.

Although none of these medications can cure Alzheimer's or stop it from getting worse, they may offer help. If behavioral problems become prominent, doctors may prescribe various psychiatric medications, but care is required to reduce the risk of side effects, which can be serious.

Although supplements such as vitamin E, Ginkgo biloba, and DHEA are widely promoted to boost memory, there is little evidence that they help.

Protection and Support

Serious memory loss puts a tremendous burden on patients and their families. Simple measures to prevent accidents and injuries are important, especially for patients who live independently. Examples include using night lights and removing loose rugs and electrical cords to prevent falls, installing handrails on stairs and in showers, locking medicine cabinets, setting the water heater no higher than 120 degrees, removing electrical appliances from the bathroom, and replacing the stove with a microwave.

In time, many patients need more protection and support, ranging from adult day care centers to protected living arrangements. It's difficult and stressful for caregivers and loved ones, who also need support and help.

New Horizons

It's easy to compensate for mild age-related memory lapses, but serious memory loss is a major health problem. Lifestyle adjustments and preventive medical care hold real promise for reducing the risk of memory loss in old age. Doctors have made advances in diagnosis and treatment, but much more progress is needed. New research into an Alzheimer's vaccine has raised hope for the future and underlines the importance of research to conquer memory loss.





To learn more about memory loss, visit the **Pri-Med Patient Education Center** at www.patientedu.org/memory.

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