



Hold On To Your Memory

Slowly losing one's memory to Alzheimer's disease or other dementia can be one of the scariest prospects of aging. But declining mental capabilities need not be synonymous with aging. You can take steps to help preserve your mental abilities.

Pinpoint the Problem

Alzheimer's affects fewer people than the media might lead you to believe: only 1% of people over age 65.* Medical research indicates that most of the memory lapses that affect older people can be treated and often completely reversed. The cause of forgetfulness often lies in one of the following treatable categories:

- **A health condition.** Anemia, lung disease, high blood pressure and severe hypothyroidism can reduce the amount of blood that circulates to the brain or skew the proper level of hormones, which can affect brain function. A thorough examination by your physician can expose the underlying cause and assign the appropriate treatment.
- **An improper dosage of medicine.** People over age 55 react differently to prescription drugs than younger individuals. Ask your doctor to review your dosages and combinations for potential problems.
- **Your general health.** Dehydration, malnutrition, low blood sugar and lack of exercise can erode your mental acuity. Drink plenty of fluids, eat a balanced diet and walk for 30 minutes each day to help maintain mental sharpness.
- **Normal memory lapses.** Forgetting the name of a familiar object or where you put your keys are often due to weakening of connections between sounds and names, inattention or disinterest. Though frustrating, these memory lapses happen to everyone and may improve by repeating a name to yourself or using cues.

Severe memory loss may be cause for concern and require a visit to the doctor, especially if recall problems hinder daily activities or cause a noticeable and consistent decline in memory. Alzheimer's disease, a degenerative disorder marked by the accumulation of insoluble protein deposits in the brain, produces language problems, confusion, impaired judgment and failure to recognize these problems in oneself.

Protect Your Mental Health

Keep your mind agile to maintain your memories. Studies show that adults who participated in intellectual activities during midlife were three to four times less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than those who were less mentally active.** Experts suggest adopting the following daily habits:

- **Flex your brain.** Perform mentally challenging activities every day. You'll build neural networks and keep your mind sharp. Consider reading, writing letters, playing music or board games, solving crossword puzzles and doing crafts, hobbies or jigsaw puzzles.
- **Watch your diet.** Researchers have found that individuals who carry a certain genetic marker, the ApoE-e4 allele, run a seven times greater risk of developing Alzheimer's disease if they eat a high-fat diet during early and mid-adulthood.***
- **Sleep.** Fatigue can lead to inattentiveness and absent-mindedness. Experts caution against using over-the-counter sleep aids, which may actually worsen the problem.
- **Exercise.** Tests show that aerobic exercise may improve memory functions by increasing the levels of certain proteins in the brain.+

Hope for the Future

The threat of Alzheimer's disease is frightening, but every day scientists gain a better understanding of the disorder. Researchers are currently testing an enzyme inhibitor that may slow the disease and a vaccine that may prevent it altogether. It's important to remember, however, that many of the memory problems that plague older adults are entirely treatable. If you have concerns, see your physician for a complete exam.

* Source: *Depression in Late Life: A Guide for Older Adults*, *Mental Health Association of Minnesota*.

** Source: *CBS HealthWatch*.

<http://healthwatch.medscape.com>

*** Source: Alzheimer's Association, www.alz.org.

+Source: *New Choices*, Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000.

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