

Memory changes

This help sheet describes some of the differences between memory loss as a part of normal ageing and as a symptom of dementia. It provides some tips for keeping your memory sharp.

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, particularly Alzheimer's disease, is very different. It is persistent and progressive, not just occasional. It may affect the 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. A person with dementia however, may lose the car keys and then forget what they are used for.

Key points about normal forgetfulness

- As we get older, the most common change that we complain about is memory change
- Knowledge about how memory changes as we get older is a lot more positive than in the past. Memory change with healthy ageing certainly doesn't interfere with everyday life in a 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, on the ability to get new information into storage, on the time it takes to recall things and "on the tip of the tongue" experiences
- Research also suggests that immediate memory and lifetime memory do not change as we get older

Based on **Remembering Well**, by Delys Sergeant and Anne Unkenstein. (Allen and Unwin, 1998)

Description	Person with dementia	Older person
Events	May forget part or all of an event	Memory may sometimes be vague
Words or names for things or objects	Progressively forgets	Sometimes may forget; words or names are on the tip of the tongue
Written and verbal directions	Increasingly unable to follow	Able to follow
Stories on TV, in movies or books	Progressively loses ability to follow	Able to follow
Stored knowledge	Over time loses known information such as historical or political information	Although recall may be slower, information is essentially retained
Everyday skills such as dressing and cooking	Progressively loses capacity to perform tasks	Retains ability, unless physically impaired

Debunking memory myths

Myth One

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 Two

You lose 10,000 brain cells a day, and 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 Three

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.

From **Memory: Remembering and forgetting in everyday life**, by Dr Barry Gordon. (NY: Master, 1995)

Tips for keeping 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 memory sharp:

- Avoid harmful substances. Excessive drinking and drug abuse damages brain cells
- Challenge yourself. Reading widely, keeping mentally active and learning new skills strengthens brain connections and promotes 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 loss
- Make sure you get regular and adequate sleep
- Eat a well balanced diet
- Pay attention. Concentrate on what you want to remember
- Minimise and resist distractions
- Use a notepad and carry a calendar. This may not keep your memory sharp, but does compensate for any memory lapses
- Take your time
- Organise belongings. Create a particular place for essential items, such as car keys and glasses
- Repeat names of new acquaintances in conversation

Further Information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at dementia.org.au



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**