

Age Related Memory Loss:

Worried about your forgetfulness? Learn what's normal when it comes to memory and aging, and how to recognize the signs of more serious problems. (The first part of this article was published in July 2020)

Reversible causes of memory loss: It's important to remember that memory loss doesn't automatically mean that you have dementia. There are many other reasons why you may be experiencing cognitive problems, including stress, depression, and even vitamin deficiencies. That's why it's so important to go to a doctor to get an official diagnosis if you're experiencing problems. Sometimes, even what looks like significant memory loss can be caused by treatable conditions and reversible external factors, such as: Depression. Depression can mimic the signs of memory loss, making it hard for you to concentrate, stay organized, remember things, and get stuff done. Depression is a common problem in older adults—especially if you're less social and active than you used to be or you've recently experienced a number of important losses or major life changes (retirement, a serious medical diagnosis, the loss of a loved one, moving out of your home).

Vitamin B12 deficiency. Vitamin B12 protects neurons and is vital to healthy brain functioning. In fact, a lack of B12 can cause permanent damage to the brain. Older people have a slower nutritional absorption rate, which can make it difficult for you to get the B12 your mind and body need. If you smoke or drink, you may be at particular risk. If you address a vitamin B12 deficiency early, you can reverse the associated memory problems. Treatment is available in the form of a monthly injection.

Thyroid problems. The thyroid gland controls metabolism: if your metabolism is too fast, you may feel confused, and if it's too slow, you can feel sluggish and depressed. Thyroid problems can cause memory problems such as forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating. Medication can reverse the symptoms.

Alcohol abuse. Excessive alcohol intake is toxic to brain cells, and alcohol abuse leads to memory loss. Over time, alcohol abuse may also increase the risk of dementia. Because of the damaging effects of excessive drinking, experts advise limiting your daily intake to just 1-2 drinks. Older adults are particularly susceptible to dehydration. Severe dehydration can cause confusion, drowsiness, memory loss, and other

symptoms that look like dementia. It's important to stay hydrated (aim for 6–8 drinks per day). Be particularly vigilant if you take diuretics or laxatives or suffer from diabetes, high blood sugar, or diarrhea.

Side effects of medication. Many prescribed and over-the-counter drugs or combinations of drugs can cause cognitive problems and memory loss as a side effect. This is especially common in older adults because they break down and absorb medication more slowly. Common medications that affect memory and brain function include sleeping pills, antihistamines, blood pressure and arthritis medication, muscle relaxants, anticholinergic drugs for urinary incontinence and gastrointestinal discomfort, antidepressants, anti-anxiety meds, and painkillers. Are you taking three or more drugs? As well as certain individual medications, taking too many medications can also create cognitive problems. A recent study found that the more medications you take, the higher your risk for brain atrophy. Researchers found that the loss of gray matter was most acute in people who took three or more different medications. If you are concerned about the medications you're taking, talk to your doctor. But do NOT stop taking your medications without your doctor's consent.

Compensating for memory loss The same practices that contribute to healthy aging and physical vitality also contribute to a healthy memory. So, by taking steps early to prevent cognitive decline, you'll also be improving all other aspects of your life as well. Stay social. People who aren't socially engaged with family and friends are at higher risk for memory problems than people who have strong social ties. Quality face-to-face social interaction can greatly reduce stress and is powerful medicine for the brain, so schedule time with friends, join a book club, or visit the local senior center. And be sure to put your phone away and focus fully on the people you're with if you want the full brain benefit.

Stop smoking. Smoking heightens the risk of vascular disorders that can cause stroke and constrict arteries that deliver oxygen to the brain. When you quit smoking, the brain quickly benefits from improved circulation.

Manage stress. Cortisol, the stress hormone, damages the brain over time and can lead to memory problems. But even before that happens, stress or anxiety can cause memory difficulties in the moment. When you're stressed out or anxious, you're more likely to suffer memory lapses and have trouble learning or concentrating. But simple stress management techniques can minimize these harmful effects.

Get enough sleep. Getting a good night's sleep as you age is necessary for memory consolidation, the process of forming and storing new memories so you can retrieve them later. Sleep deprivation reduces the growth of new neurons in the hippocampus and causes problems with memory, concentration, and decision-making. It can even lead to depression—another memory killer. Watch what you eat. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables and drink green tea as these foods contain antioxidants in abundance, which can keep your brain cells from “rusting.” Foods rich in omega-3 fats (such as salmon, tuna, trout, walnuts, and flaxseed) are particularly good for your brain and memory. Eating too many calories, though, can increase your risk of developing memory loss or cognitive impairment.

Exercise regularly. Starting a regular exercise routine, including cardio and strength training, may reduce your risk of developing dementia by up to 50 percent. What's more, exercise can also slow further deterioration in those who have already started to develop cognitive problems. Exercise protects against Alzheimer's by stimulating the brain's ability to maintain old connections as well as make new ones.

Walking: An easy way to fight memory loss New research indicates that walking six to nine miles every week can prevent brain shrinkage and memory loss. According to the American Academy of Neurology, older adults who walked between six and nine miles per week had more gray matter in their brains nine years after the start of the study than people who didn't walk as much.

Brain exercises to combat memory loss: Just as physical exercise can make and keep your body stronger, mental exercise can make your brain work better and lower your risk of mental decline. Try to find brain exercises that you find enjoyable. The more pleasurable an activity is to you, the more powerful its effect will be on your brain. You can make some activities more enjoyable by appealing to your senses—by playing music during the exercise, for example, or lighting a scented candle, or rewarding yourself after you've finished. Here are some ideas for brain exercise, from light workouts to heavy lifting:

- Play games you are not already familiar with that involve strategy, like chess or bridge, and word games like Scrabble. Try crossword and other word puzzles, or number puzzles such as Sudoku.
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Read newspapers, magazines, and books that challenge you.

- Get in the habit of learning new things: games, recipes, driving routes, a

musical instrument, a foreign language. Take a course in an unfamiliar subject that interests you. The more interested and engaged your brain, the more likely you' ll be to continue learning and the greater the benefits you' ll experience. • Improve how well you do existing activities. If you already speak a foreign language, commit to improving your fluency. Or if you' re a keen golfer, aim to lower your handicap. • Take on a project that involves design and planning, such as a new garden, a quilt, or a koi pond.

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