

Normal Aging or Signs of Alzheimer's? Understanding Memory Lapses

Getting ready to leave the house, you realize you have no idea where you left your car keys. In the middle of a conversation, you struggle for the word you wish to use. Walking into the living room, it takes you a few moments to recall what you were planning to do there.

These kinds of memory lapses, common among older adults, can be more than frustrating. Many people fear these are early signs of Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. Experts say while this concern is understandable, there are ways to differentiate between the normal impact of aging on recollection and the development of Alzheimer's and other diseases that affect memory.

"It's important to understand that there are three broad classes of memory-related conditions," said Kelly Scott, vice president of dementia care for Brookdale. "Each has its own set of indicators."

Normal Age-Related Forgetfulness (NARF): People with NARF may misplace keys on occasion, temporarily forget a word, or overlook making an appointment or taking care of an errand. However, the information usually comes to mind after a while. These moments of forgetfulness can be annoying, but are usually benign and not signs of incipient dementia.

Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI): This condition can cause people to temporarily become lost in a familiar room, have trouble understanding directions, forget recent events and misplace items on a frequent basis. It may or may not be a precursor to Alzheimer's disease and should be mentioned to a physician.

Early signs of Alzheimer's or a related dementia: Memory loss that significantly affects one's daily life can indicate that dementia is developing. Examples include:

- Forgetting what an item is used for or putting it in the wrong place, such as placing tableware in the refrigerator.
- Repeatedly becoming disoriented or lost in familiar places; for example, a person with early signs of dementia may not remember how to drive home.
- Not recognizing a family member, friend or close colleague.
- Increasing difficulty handling money or performing tasks with complexity, such as cooking.
- Frequently forgetting recent events, losing track of the time of day, having trouble taking part in conversations.
- Experiencing mood changes, losing the ability to make good judgments.

"If you or a loved one are concerned about memory loss, it's crucial to visit a physician for evaluation to determine if it comes from normal aging or is an early sign of dementia," Scott said. "While many people say they would rather not know if they are going to develop dementia, early detection is actually valuable. When the disease is identified early, you have an opportunity to potentially slow the progression through the right kind of care and treatment."

It's also possible that the worrisome symptoms stem from another reason entirely, such as the combined effects of prescription drugs, or depression. Addressing those issues could alleviate the problem.

"What's most important is people don't ignore symptoms and concerns that they take proactive steps as soon as possible," Scott said. "This makes all the difference for individuals and for their loved ones."