

Memory loss: Just a sign of aging, or something more?

By Natalie McGill

The older you become, the more often you may face moments of forgetfulness, such as losing track of where you left today's newspaper or misplacing your wallet.

While some forgetfulness is common with aging, its effect on how you function in day-to-day life may be the difference between being mildly forgetful and having more severe forms of memory loss.

Aging brings changes in not only memory but also learning and attention, which means what looks like forgetfulness may just be not paying enough attention to new information to retain it, says Molly Wagster, PhD, chief of the Behavioral and Systems Neuroscience Branch at the National Institute on Aging. Becoming forgetful is a natural part of the aging process.

"Processing information quickly becomes more difficult, learning new things, the ability to easily produce the name of an acquaintance or a book that we read recently or a movie that we saw," Wagster says. "These are things that change with age. However, if given enough time, older adults tend to learn things as thoroughly and accurately as a young adult."



The name we had on the tip of our tongue will come to us a few minutes or a few hours later."

If you want to improve your memory skills, Wagster says the first thing to do is simply pay attention. Doing so can help reduce stress and shut out competing noise.

Using memory aids such as a calendar or reminder notes may help with memory, she says.

The National Institute on Aging also recommends strategies such as keeping important items — such as your keys, wallet and glasses — all in one place.

Volunteering in places such

as faith-based organizations and schools and learning a new skill can also help improve memory, according to the institute.

Research also suggests healthy habits such as eating well, exercising, keeping an active social life, getting adequate sleep and controlling chronic diseases may be beneficial to cognitive health, Wagster says.

Serious memory loss can sometimes occur, however. Signs may include getting lost in places once familiar to you, poor eating habits, repeating the same questions and failing to recognize the names and faces of loved ones, according to the institute. These symptoms may be indicators of diagnosable conditions, such as dementia.

Dementia is a neurodegenerative condition marked by a number of health issues that affect a wide range of functions, such as the ability to talk, manage emotion and solve problems.

"If the level of memory loss or forgetfulness becomes such that the person... doesn't engage with friends anymore and doesn't enjoy the activities that he or she used to like to do, such as reading books or going to museums and these types of



>> Interacting socially with friends or helping someone else learn a new skill can aid in improving your memory.

things, these may imply that there is some type of serious memory problem," Wagster says.

If you sense memory loss is limiting the independence of a loved one, Wagster says the first thing to do is bring her or

him to a primary care physician to discuss the signs and symptoms.

"There may be issues with medications or other health issues that, if resolved, will reverse the memory impairment," she says.

Dealing with dementia

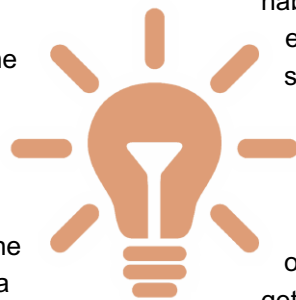
If a doctor diagnoses you or your loved one with dementia, which can

be caused by disorders such as Alzheimer's disease, there are resources available to learn how to manage the disease with help from friends, family and experts.

NIA's Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center offers resources such as how to find specialists for dementia care as well as a toll-free number, 1-800-438-4380, to get questions answered. Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative brain disorder that affects memory, thinking and physical function.

"There are also publications available on the website, including one on forgetfulness that I think people would find very informative and very beneficial if they are dealing with someone who has been diagnosed with dementia or even have concerns themselves," Wagster says.

>> For more information on memory loss, visit www.nia.nih.gov



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