

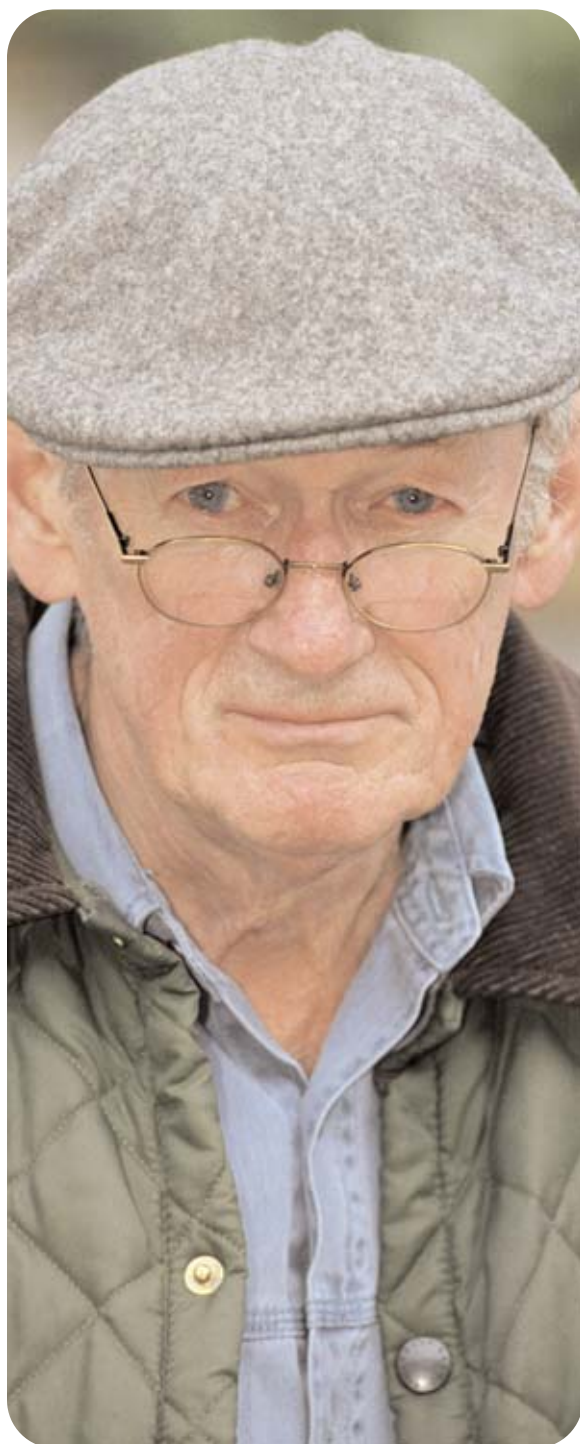
# Understanding Memory Loss



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# Introduction



We've all forgotten a name, where we put our keys, or if we locked the front door. It's normal to forget things once in a while. However, forgetting how to make change, use the telephone, or find your way home may be signs of a more serious memory problem.

We have written this booklet to help you know:

1. The difference between mild forgetfulness and more serious memory problems.
2. The medical causes of memory problems and how they can be treated.
3. How to cope with serious memory problems.

**Use the Table of Contents on the left to help you find things quickly.**

# 1

## Differences between mild forgetfulness and more serious memory problems.

### Jeanne's story:

Jeanne couldn't find her car keys. She looked on the hook just inside the front door. They weren't there. She searched in her purse. No luck. Finally, she found them on her desk. Yesterday, she forgot her neighbor's name. Her memory was playing tricks on her. She was starting to worry about it. She decided to see her doctor. After a complete check-up, her doctor said that Jeanne was fine. Her forgetfulness was just a normal part of getting older. The doctor suggested that Jeanne take a class, play cards with friends, or help out at the local school to sharpen her memory.



### What is mild forgetfulness?

It is true that some of us get more forgetful as we age. It may take longer to learn new things, remember familiar names and words, or find our glasses. These are usually signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems.

**If you're worried about your forgetfulness, see your doctor.** You also can do many things to help keep your memory sharp. Finding a hobby, spending time with friends, eating well, and exercising may help you stay alert and clear-headed.

## Here are some ways to help your memory:

- Learn a new skill.
- Volunteer in your community, school, or place of worship.
- Spend time with friends and family whenever possible.
- Use memory tools such as big calendars, to-do lists, and notes to yourself.
- Put your wallet or purse, keys, and glasses in the same place each day.
- Get lots of rest.
- Exercise and eat well.
- Don't drink a lot of alcohol.
- Get help if you feel depressed for weeks at a time.



Spending time with friends and family may help keep your memory sharp.

## What is a serious memory problem?

Serious memory problems affect your ability to carry out everyday life activities such as driving a car, shopping, or handling money. Signs of serious memory problems may include:

- Asking the same questions over and over again.
- Becoming lost in places you know well.
- Not being able to follow directions.
- Getting very confused about time, people, and places.
- Not taking care of yourself — eating poorly, not bathing, or being unsafe.



Getting lost in a place you know well may be a sign of a serious memory problem.



Having trouble with your memory may affect your driving.

## What to do about serious memory problems

If you are having any of the problems listed on page 4, see your doctor. It's important to find out what might be causing a serious memory problem. Your treatment depends on the cause of the problem.



Talk to your doctor if you think you have a serious memory problem.

# 2

## Medical causes of memory problems and how they can be treated.

### Al's story:

Al didn't know what was happening. He was having a hard time remembering things. He wasn't eating well and couldn't seem to get interested in seeing friends or taking his usual walk around the neighborhood. He was confused and irritable. He wasn't sleeping well at night. His wife was worried. She took him to the doctor. It turned out that Al was having a bad reaction to one of his medicines. Once his doctor changed the medicine, Al felt more like his old self.



Some medications may cause memory problems. Check with your doctor. Changing medications may help.



## What causes serious memory problems?

### Medical conditions

Certain medical conditions can cause serious memory problems. These problems should go away once you get treatment. Here's a list of things that cause memory problems:

- Bad reaction to certain medicines
- Depression
- Not having enough fluids in your body, also called dehydration
- Not eating enough healthy foods, or too few vitamins and minerals in your body
- Minor head injuries
- Thyroid problems

**These medical conditions are serious and should be treated by a doctor.**

### Emotional problems

Some emotional problems in older people can cause serious memory problems. Feeling sad, lonely, worried, or bored can cause you to be confused and forgetful. Being active, spending more time with family and friends, and learning new skills can help. You may need to see a doctor or counselor for treatment. Once you get help, your memory problems should get better.



Feeling very sad and worried may cause serious memory problems.

## Anna's story:

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Anna's mother was still going strong at 85. She kept busy with friends and church activities. But lately, Anna had noticed that things were changing. Her mother was becoming more forgetful and confused. Also, she was spending a lot of time alone in her house, which wasn't like her. One day, her mom got lost on her way home from shopping. Anna knew it was time to get help. She took her mom to the doctor. Anna was really upset to learn that her mom had early stage **Alzheimer's disease**. It's been tough, but learning about treatment choices and how to live with the disease has helped the whole family. They're taking one day at a time.

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Talking to your family about Alzheimer's disease can help.

**Alzheimer’s disease** (pronounced Allz-high-merz di-zeez)

Alzheimer’s disease also causes serious memory problems. The signs of Alzheimer’s disease begin slowly and get worse over time. This is because nerve cell changes in the brain cause large numbers of brain cells to die. It may look like simple forgetfulness at first, but over time, people with Alzheimer’s disease have trouble thinking clearly. They find it hard to do everyday things like shopping, driving, cooking, and having a conversation. As the illness gets worse, people with Alzheimer’s disease may need someone to take care of all their needs (feeding, bathing, etc.) at home or in a nursing home.

**Medication can help**

If you are in the early or middle stages of Alzheimer’s disease, taking medications can help. Some medicines keep symptoms, such as memory loss, from getting worse for a time. Medications also can help if you are worried, depressed, or are having problems sleeping.

**See page 15 to learn where you and your family can go for help and information.**



Some medications can help with memory problems.

## Sam's story:

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Sam feels good for a guy his age. He's an active 70 year old. So, he couldn't believe it when, all of a sudden, he couldn't remember what somebody told him 5 minutes ago.

He went for a check-up. The doctor told him that his forgetfulness was caused by small strokes. These strokes had damaged some of his brains cells. She said his problem was called **multi-infarct dementia**. She said that she couldn't cure his memory problems, but that she would give him medicine to lower his high blood pressure. This medicine also would lower his chances of having more strokes.

Sam wasn't happy to find out that his doctor couldn't fix everything. Even so, he agreed to take his medication. At least then he'd be doing something to keep from having more strokes.

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Even active people can have memory problems.

**Multi-infarct dementia** (pronounced Mull-tee in-farkt di-men-sha)

Many people have never heard of multi-infarct dementia. Like Alzheimer's disease, it is a medical condition that causes serious memory problems. Unlike Alzheimer's disease, signs of multi-infarct dementia may appear suddenly. This is because the memory loss and confusion are caused by small strokes or changes in the blood supply to the brain. If the strokes stop, you can get better or stay the same for a long time. If you have more strokes, you can get worse. Taking care of your high blood pressure can lower your chances of getting this illness.



Get your blood pressure checked each time you see the doctor.

# 3

## How to cope with serious memory problems.

### **What should I do if I'm worried about my memory?**

See your doctor. If your doctor thinks it's serious, you may need to have a complete checkup, including blood and urine tests. You also may need to take tests that check your memory, problem solving, counting, and language skills. In addition, you may need a CAT scan of the brain. These pictures can show normal and problem areas in the brain. Once the doctor finds out what is causing your memory problems, ask about what is the best treatment for you.



Doctors can check for some causes of memory problems using CAT scans.

## What can family members do to help?

Family members and friends can help you live as normal a life as possible. They can help you exercise, visit with friends, and keep up your daily routines. They can remind you of the time of day, where you live, and what is happening at home and in the world.

### Some families use the following things to help with memory:

- Big calendars
- Lists of the plans for each day
- Notes about safety in the home
- Written directions for using common household items



Family and friends can help support you.

## Summary

We hope this booklet helps you understand:

1. The differences between normal forgetfulness and the signs of a more serious illness.
2. The medical causes of memory problems and how they can be treated.
3. How to cope with serious memory problems.

See your doctor if you are worried about your memory. It's important to find out what is causing your memory problems.



It's important to find out what is causing your memory problems.



## Where can I get more information?

There are many resources to help you find out more about memory loss. Contact the following organizations to learn about support groups, services, publications on Alzheimer's disease, research centers, and studies:

### **Alzheimer's Association**

**225 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1700**

**Chicago, IL 60611**

**Phone: 1-800-272-3900**

**Website: [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)**

The Alzheimer's Association is a nonprofit organization offering information and support services to people with Alzheimer's disease and their families. Call to find out where to get help in your area.



**Alzheimer’s Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center**

**P.O. Box 8250**

**Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250**

**Phone: 1-800-438-4380**

**Website: [www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov](http://www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov)**

The Alzheimer’s Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center offers information on diagnosis, treatment, patient care, caregiver needs, long-term care, and research related to Alzheimer’s disease. Staff can refer you to local and national resources. The Center is a service of the National Institute on Aging, part of the Federal Government’s National Institutes of Health.

**Eldercare Locator**

**Phone: 1-800-677-1116**

**Website: [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov)**

Families often need information about community resources, such as home care, adult day care, and nursing homes. Contact the Eldercare Locator to find these resources in your area. The Eldercare Locator is a service of the Administration on Aging. It is funded by the Federal Government.



Call for more information.

**For copies of this booklet, contact:**

**Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center**

**P.O. Box 8250**

**Silver Spring, MD 20907-8250**

**Phone: 1-800-438-4380**

**Website: [www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov](http://www.alzheimers.nia.nih.gov)**



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