

Are Your Loved one's Memory Lapses Merely Awkward? Or Are They More Serious?

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For the first time ever, your mother forgot your birthday. Back from a recent vacation, your father can't recall what sites he visited. More and more, your aunt mixes you up with your siblings.

Sure, none of us are as young as we used to be. And as we watch our loved ones grow older we expect to see a little decline in memory. But what's normal and what's not? How do we tell whether a loved one is experiencing normal age-related memory loss, or whether it might be the early stages of Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's is a progressive, degenerative disease that destroys vital brain cells. It starts slowly and gradually: the major symptoms are a persistent decline in memory, often coupled with changes in judgment and increasing difficulty performing day-to-day tasks. Unfortunately there's no blood test or X-ray to diagnose Alzheimer's. The diagnosis must be made after a thorough medical exam. But the more you know about memory loss, the more you may be able to tell when it's time to help your loved one get a doctor's assessment.

FORGETFULNESS AND AGING: Forgetfulness by itself is not a perfect indicator of Alzheimer's. One U.S. study found that once a week, average healthy people forget where they put something, have to recheck whether they'd done something such as lock the door, or have a tip-of-the-tongue experience, where they can't quite recall a name or word; once a month, they completely forget to do something important, such as pass on a message. As long as the extent of memory loss is mild, doesn't progress and doesn't affect daily functioning, then there's usually no cause for concern.

But here's the difference: when forgetfulness is persistent, interferes with daily functioning and gets progressively worse, Alzheimer's or other types of dementia must be considered.

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Memory is a tricky thing. As we age, some types of memory remain quite intact. For example, procedural memory – remembering how to play the piano, throw a football or swim the backstroke – doesn't fade with age, even in people in the early to moderate stages of Alzheimer's. On the other hand, declarative memory – recalling names, facts and events – does decline with age even in healthy people, and more dramatically in people developing Alzheimer's. But while a healthy person may forget the name of the new dentist, someone with Alzheimer's may forget the name of a dear friend or a favourite grandchild. People with the disease also increasingly lose the ability to perform tasks that involve concentration, organization or higher reasoning, such as critiquing a book or planning a dinner party.

HOW TO HELP: It's natural to want to help out a loved one who's experiencing memory problems. Useful suggestions include encouraging the person to make lists, keep track of upcoming events on a calendar or use Post-It notes as reminders to buy cat food or call the dishwasher repairman. These can be helpful whether the person is experiencing normal age-related memory problems or early Alzheimer's.

But it's not helpful to hide symptoms or get into a pattern of constantly covering for a loved one; for instance, by saying, "Dad stopped playing bridge because he needs new glasses" or "Mom doesn't make her favourite recipes anymore because they're too high-fat – right, Mom?" While it comes from the best of intentions, continuing to cover for a loved one without seeking medical advice may serve only to delay a proper diagnosis.

Any memory loss should be checked out by a physician. There could be other causes, such as thyroid problems or drug interactions. If it is Alzheimer's, early diagnosis and treatment are crucial to help your loved one maintain independence for as long as possible.

ONLY A DOCTOR CAN DIAGNOSE ALZHEIMER'S

But understanding the differences (below) between normal age-related memory loss and something more serious may give you a clearer picture of when your loved one needs medical help.

DON'T BE TOO CONCERNED IF YOUR LOVED ONE...	PAY CLOSE ATTENTION IF YOUR LOVED ONE...
Calls a memory card "that thing for the digital camera."	Calls a toothbrush "that thing for my mouth."
Forgets to buy bread and has to make a special trip	Keeps expired food in the pantry or has an empty fridge
Calls one relative by another's name	Can't remember the names of familiar relatives
Tells the same favourite story or joke at every major get-together	Repeats the same story in the same conversation
Increasingly makes lists and writes notes on calendars	Can't remember to write things down
Occasionally misses a bill payment	Has a pile of unpaid bills or undeposited cheques
Doesn't remember what was for dinner	Doesn't remember if he or she ate dinner
Has difficulty following a complex movie plot or a technical conversation	Has difficulty following a sitcom or a basic conversation
Keeps forgetting to buy more shampoo or soap	Forgets to shower, bathe or shave unless prompted
Has trouble following directions for a new appliance or device	Has trouble following even simple or familiar directions
Forgets to order the latest coin set for a beloved collection	Loses interest in a favourite hobby or activity
Misplaces a wallet or purse	Puts wallet in the fridge or hides money
Forgets if he or she already sent a donation to a charity	Gives away large sums to telemarketers or pays for unneeded home repairs
Talks or jokes about memory lapses	Is confused by, or unaware of, memory lapses

Courtesy:

<http://www.thecareguide.com/Resources/ResourceDetails.aspx?section=MemoryLoss&itemid=66>

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