

12 FACTS I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MEMORY PROBLEMS

1. Does a memory problem mean that I am losing my mind?

Answer: No. People with memory problems are not losing their minds. The doctor will not think that you are “going crazy” if you tell him that you have difficulties with memory. There is a difference between losing a few memories and losing a mind.

2. Will people treat me differently if I go to the doctor about memory?

Answer: People should not treat you differently. Many people over the age of 60 have some memory complaints. These people continue to lead normal lives in their family and in many instances with their jobs.

3. Is memory loss a normal part of aging?

Answer: No. Memory loss becomes common as we grow older but this symptom is not part of being “normal”. However, memory loss does not mean that you have Alzheimer’s disease.

4. Does memory complaints mean that I will develop a big problem such as Alzheimer’s disease?

Answer: No. Some people with minor memory troubles never get worse. Other persons may have treatable illnesses that are causing the memory trouble. Minor memory problems may be MCI or mild cognitive impairment.

5. How does it help to visit a doctor about my memory trouble?

Answer: A medical evaluation helps in many ways. First, a medical evaluation can find treatable illnesses that slow or reverse the memory loss. Secondly, medications help more serious causes of memory trouble such as Alzheimer’s disease by slowing the progress of memory loss. Third, people with memory loss can change health behaviors to slow the progress of the problem.

6. What are some examples of medical problems that cause memory loss?

Answer: Many health problems cause memory loss. Thyroid or hormonal problems, confusing medications, sleep problems, depression, and many other kinds of medical or nervous system diseases can cause memory problems.

7. How do I get a good evaluation?

Answer: A good evaluation for memory troubles takes about one hour of the doctor’s time and usually requires detailed laboratory testing and sometimes a brain scan. Paper and pencil intellectual testing is often helpful; however, many health insurance companies will not pay for this testing and patients may not be able to afford this assessment.

8. What if I have Alzheimer’s disease? Does that mean that I will go crazy and be a burden to my family?

Answer: No. Many patients with Alzheimer’s disease lead healthy lives for long periods of time. Available medicines slow the progress of the disease for about two years. New medicines are under development right now that will further slow the progress of the illness.

9. Why should I bother with an evaluation? Wouldn’t it be better for the doctor to simply put me on the medicine if he thinks I have Alzheimer’s disease?

Answer: No. Many treatable health problems look like Alzheimer’s disease and can be corrected or reversed. Memory loss is caused by many neurological problems. Five

different common causes and about 20 less common causes of dementia occur in people over the age of 65. Your doctor should try to determine which type of dementia is present.

10. How can I get a thorough evaluation for dementia?

Answer: A complete dementia evaluation includes a careful history, which requires about 20-30 minutes as well as a complete physical examination and neurological examination. The physical examination looks for health problems that might cause memory loss, while the neurological examination checks for evidence of brain damage that may give clues about the cause of memory loss. Many primary care doctors choose to refer patients with memory troubles to specialists such as neurologists or psychiatrists. The UAB Alzheimer's Disease Center offers a memory clinic as well as an opportunity to participate in research studies with the newest medications that may not be available to community-based doctors.

11. When should I seek medical help for memory loss?

Answer: Any memory loss that disrupts your daily life is serious. Memory loss that occurs on a daily basis and causes you to take special measures, such as writing constant reminders or avoiding certain actions are significant.

12. How does a memory evaluation help my family?

Answer: Most family members recognize important changes in memory for older persons. Many family members begin to worry but are unsure how to help. Family may not want to embarrass or alarm a parent or spouse. You can reduce their stress by getting an evaluation.

IMPORTANT FACTS FOR A FAMILY MEMBER WHO IS WORRIED ABOUT A PERSON WITH MEMORY TROUBLES

1. Memory troubles are common in older persons.
2. Most older people with memory troubles know that they have memory troubles.
3. Some older people with memory troubles are afraid that they are going crazy.
4. Many older people believe that waiting will make memory get better.
5. Many treatable health problems can cause troubles with memory.
6. Available prescription medicines may slow the progress of memory troubles.
7. A proper evaluation for memory disorders begins with one hour of doctor's time and a physician who is trained to do the assessment.
8. Dementia can be caused by many kinds of brain diseases with different treatments, different complications, and different risks for inheritance.
9. Memory loss is not diagnosed by brain scans such as CAT scans or MRI's.
10. Everyone with memory loss should have a careful evaluation to find treatable illnesses and consider therapy.