

## THE KEYS, A NAME, A NUMBER - I CAN'T REMEMBER

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\* When should you worry about the things you forget?

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One morning, as I have done for countless other mornings, I stood at the sink to wash my face. I looked down at the faucets and could not remember which was for the hot water and which for the cold.

At first, I was amused, but moments passed, and I still could not choose a faucet with certainty. This seemed silly. What was wrong with me? I decided to pick the one I thought was hot and let it run.

It was taking too long. Could I have picked the wrong one?

My husband was in the shower, but I dared not share my predicament. A feeling of dread started to rise as I realized I really could not figure this out. Because the water was still cold, I turned it off and opened the other faucet. In a few seconds, I had hot water. I washed my face, a little shaken, perhaps having glimpsed my future.

My story is common for those of us at a certain age, even those of us who are fit, trim, and holding on to youth for dear life. Lapses in memory are common as people grow older. But how much is too much? And when should we be concerned?

FIRST, BRAIN BIOLOGY. A number of changes affect the brain during normal aging. Some neurons die and connections tangle. Neurons associated with learning seem to survive, but those associated with memory, planning, and other complex mental activities shrink and function less well. Brain cells also become susceptible to damage from inflammation and oxidation. Modest amounts of what's known as Age-Associated Memory Impairment occur for almost everyone, usually without consequence.

Most of us remain alert as we age, although it may take us longer to remember things. We enter rooms and can't remember why, see people we've known for years and can't recall their names, and get halfway through a sentence only to end it with, "what was I saying?" It's unsettling and scary.

Whether forgetting is a serious medical condition or just an annoyance "all hinges on function," says Dr. Brian R. Ott, director of the Alzheimer's Disease and Memory Disorders Unit at Rhode Island Hospital.

"If any degree of memory loss is having an effect on your work or your home life, then it may be time for concern. That may be the beginning of dementia."

Make no mistake about it, dementia is more serious than forgetting a few things. It is a brain disorder, not just a memory problem. It involves a more diffused impairment of mental function that is significant enough to affect daily life. Alzheimer's disease is a form of dementia. People with Alzheimer's forget simple tasks such as how to brush their teeth, and they have trouble thinking, speaking, understanding, reading, or writing. They may also become aggressive or anxious.

MOST OF US have "benign forgetfulness." Frustration at not being able to remember things like you used to will not qualify you for dementia.

"If you can carry out all of your occupational activities to the level required and carry out all of your home duties pay your bills, do all of your errands, and your shopping it's probably not diagnosable dementia," Ott says.

The frightening part of memory loss is that Alzheimer's begins slowly with mild forgetfulness. Even Mild Cognitive Impairment, which was thought to be a distinct illness, is now known to frequently precede Alzheimer's.

Fortunately, chances of developing dementia are not as great as you might think: Less than 2 percent of people 60 years old have Alzheimer's. By age 65, that percentage still hovers around 3 to 4 percent, and increases to 15 percent for 75-year-olds.

Anyone over 85 has a 47-percent chance of getting Alzheimer's, but, Ott says, we have to keep things in perspective by first worrying (if you must) about reaching that age.

The field of study surrounding memory loss and dementia is full of that kind of good news-bad news.

For example, Alzheimer's is difficult to diagnose, but new brain- imaging techniques and psychological tests improve the possibility of early detection.

Yet, what is gained if there is no treatment or means of prevention?

DESPITE THE ADVERTISING, nothing has been discovered to cure memory loss. That doesn't stop people from trying one or several of the herbs, supplements and potions that claim to improve memory.

In Ott's practice, so many of his patients were taking supplements that he felt compelled to research and write an article on the subject, published by the Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology.

"Some of the experimental drugs that failed to show benefit are now being sold as supplements," he says.

So far, only high doses of vitamin E and the herb ginkgo bilboa have shown promise. The latter has been approved in Germany, but no evidence supports its wide use. Rather, daily use

can cause excessive bleeding, resulting in surgical complications. People are warned to tell their doctors if they are taking ginkgo.

Although Alzheimer's cannot be stopped, four medications have been approved that may help ease or stall symptoms for a limited time: Cognex, Aircept, Exelon and Reminyl.

PEOPLE WHO are having genuine trouble functioning in daily life because of poor memory should be evaluated by a physician specializing in memory disorders.

The rest of us, Ott says, "who are actually functioning well and are just worried, should probably work on identifying any potential stresses and make sure they are in good general health because it could be that some underlying psychological or medical condition is causing them to have [memory] difficulties."

Most of the time, people recall what they forget when given a little time. Harvard University neuropsychologist Dr. Marilyn Albert calls this the "A ha!" phenomenon.

Healthy people with normal memories occasionally blank on a word, feeling as if it is on the tip of the tongue. The word comes with a feeling of "Aha!" People with more serious memory problems do not get that feeling. "This feeling tells you that your tape recorder still works. When you can't retrieve the memory, when it's just not there, that's more of what happens with a brain disease. You've lost the connections and you can't play that tape again," Ott says.

Here's the kicker:

Memory loss may be either an aspect of aging or a precursor to a serious, irreversible, non-preventable disease, but you won't know until it actually incapacitates you.

And it doesn't help to complain about it.

"There is some limited research to suggest that 'complainers' may in fact be at increased risk for ultimately developing dementia," Ott says.

On a more hopeful note, Ott says, in one study, people who did things like garden and travel were shown to have better memories than those who did not.

Other studies show that people who engage in physical exercise are likely to have good memory preservation. The same goes for people who are active in family activities on a regular basis.

"My take on [the study results] is that any sort of activity, whether it's social, mental is important," Ott says. "If you maintain your vigor in your elder years, your brain will benefit."

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### **Why you forget**

- \* Distraction interrupts memory processing.
- \* Sensory losses (vision and hearing deficits) create information problems.
- \* Fatigue decreases attention span.
- \* Medications may slow mental functioning.
- \* Emotional factors (especially anxiety and depression) can interfere.
- \* Viewing things as not important reduces motivation to remember.
- \* Having lots to remember creates an overload and concern about abilities to remember.

### **How to remember**

- \* Write things down (use lists, schedules, etc.).
- \* Keep frequently used things in the same place.
- \* Use associations and placement to trigger memory (put the umbrella at the door).
- \* Review photo albums or yearbooks when you expect to see people after an absence.

### **How to exercise your memory**

- \* Learn new things. The brain is like a muscle. It remains strong and flexible when you exercise it.
- \* Stay physically active.
- \* Reduce your stress load.
- \* Take the recommended amount of a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement.

### **Resources**

- \* National Institute on Aging <http://www.nia.nih.gov/>
- \* [www.alzla.org](http://www.alzla.org): to see the brochure Working with Your Doctor When You Suspect Memory Problems.
- \* Alzheimers Disease Education and Referral Center [www.alzheimers.org/adear](http://www.alzheimers.org/adear)
- \* Alzheimer's Association: [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)