

What to Do If a Loved One is Experiencing Early Signs of Memory Loss

One of the aspects of aging we all fear the most is losing our memory, but not all changes in memory are the signs of a serious problem. Understanding what changes to expect as the brain ages is a great way to be proactive and start taking steps early to optimize your brain and cognitive health.

If you notice initial signs of memory loss in a loved one, use it as an opportunity to start a conversation – first with your loved one and also with a healthcare professional.

From medication side effects to stress and even lack of sleep, there can be many causes for changes in memory. Talking with a healthcare professional is the first step to understanding what’s causing the memory loss and how to address it.

4 Steps to Take Action:

1 Document

Document any changes you notice in your loved one’s memory in as much detail as possible, so you can refer to the list when talking to a healthcare professional.

The checklist below can help you mark off specific changes and better understand which changes in memory may be expected as the brain ages and those that may signal a more serious problem.

Green boxes represent normal changes as you age and the blue boxes may be signs of a more serious problem.

Making a bad decision occasionally	Memory loss that disrupts daily life	Decreased or poor judgment
Missing a monthly payment	Inability to follow instructions or directions	Changes in mood and personality
Losing track of time	Confusion about time, people, or places	Losing the ability to retrace steps
Not being able to find the right words	Difficulty completing familiar tasks	Withdrawal from work or social activities
Losing items around the house	Issues with words while speaking or writing	Asking the same questions or telling the same story repeatedly
Needing to make lists to remember appointments or tasks	Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships	
Occasionally forgetting a person’s name or remembering it later		

Also, list any situational changes your loved one may be experiencing. Examples are any changes in lifestyle, like a recent move or the loss of a friend, or other health concerns, like stress, depression, changes in hearing or vision, or a chronic illness.

Use the box below to list any situational changes and approximately when you first started noticing them.

2 Connect.

Ask neighbors, friends and other relatives who are close with your loved one if they've noticed any changes in your loved one's memory or behavior in general.

3 Make a conversation game plan

When it comes to memory, it can be difficult to ask someone you care for about changes you've noticed, but having the conversation early can be an important step to determining what's causing the problem. Sometimes the underlying problem can be treated, and cognition – the ability to clearly think, learn and remember – may improve.

Use the tips below to help start the conversation:

- Find a quiet time to talk to your loved one when they aren't distracted with other activities.
- Conversation is a two-way street. When talking to a loved one about their memory, bring up your concerns gently and make sure to ask questions to find out if your loved one is concerned or has noticed any changes in their own memory.
- Ask your loved one how they are doing and if anything has changed recently to affect their mood, sleep, appetite, interest in other activities, etc. If your loved one is comfortable sharing, it could be helpful to note any changes in the medications they are taking.

4 Show up and be supportive

Offer to help your loved one in any way you can.

- Attending your loved one's first doctor's appointment can help ease the concern of talking about memory problems or concerns.
- Offer to come along and help take notes about what the doctor says and any suggestions he or she may make about lifestyle changes or follow up steps.
- Be a regular visitor. Stop by to see your loved one and find casual ways to check in on their feelings and any concerns. Offer to go for a walk together or bring over a healthy meal as a way to spend time together and help reinforce healthy habits.

