

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

Maybe It's Not Alzheimer's

How often have you misplaced your keys or glasses? Or can't remember where you parked your car at the mall? Do you occasionally forget people's names?

Almost everyone experiences some memory loss as they age. The brain gets older just like the rest of the body and it doesn't work as well as it once did. Aging brains take longer to process new information even though memories from the past are recalled easily. You can't remember where you put your gloves but have no problem reciting the poem you learned when you were six.

Families of older adults often worry when a relative shows signs of forgetfulness and fear that it may be an early symptom of Alzheimer's disease or other memory disorder. However, memory loss can be caused by other conditions – many of which can be treated effectively.

SIDE EFFECTS OF MEDICATIONS

Medications are the most common cause of reversible memory loss. Older adults often take five or more prescription drugs and three or over-the-counter medicines every day. Because aging bodies don't metabolize drugs as well as those of younger people, the risk of side effects -- including short-term memory loss – increases.

Medicines often prescribed for older people that can cause memory loss include:

- Heartburn medications
- Prednisone and other anti-inflammatory drugs
- Valium and other sedatives
- Insulin or oral diabetes medicines
- Allergy and cold medicines

Drinking alcohol or not getting enough sleep can also affect an older person's memory.

Ask the doctor or pharmacist if any of the medications your parent takes could affect his memory. The doctor may lower the dose of the medication or substitute a similar drug that doesn't affect memory.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS AND MEMORY LOSS

Certain disorders common in older adults can cause memory loss if they aren't diagnosed and treated. These include:

- Thyroid disease
- Infections
- Vitamin deficiencies, especially vitamin B12
- Liver and kidney disease
- Diabetes. Low blood sugar levels often affects memory
- Chronic pain
- Vision and hearing loss

With correct diagnosis and treatment of these disorders, your parent's memory will very likely improve.

POOR NUTRITION

Older adults don't always eat enough nutritious foods to maintain a healthy brain. It's not always easy for older people to shop for and prepare healthy meals and snacks every day – especially if they live alone or lack transportation to the supermarket. They often have poor appetites and food just doesn't taste as good as it used to. Check your relative's refrigerator and pantry to see if he or she is eating a healthy diet. Go grocery shopping together and help him choose nutritious foods that are easy to fix.

DEHYDRATION

Dehydration also affects memory function. Older adults don't always feel thirsty and some medications can cause dehydration. Keep a pitcher of water and other low salt beverages handy and encourage your parent to drink a glass throughout the day.

DEPRESSION

Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease like sleep problems, forgetfulness, and difficulty concentrating can also be signs of depression. Depression is a serious disease in older adults. However, it can be treated effectively with medications once it has been diagnosed. When depression is treated your parent's mood will improve and so will his memory.

GOOD NEWS ABOUT MEMORY LOSS

Alzheimer's disease is one of the most worrisome diseases of later life. However, statistics compiled by the Alzheimer's Association show that only 5 million people sixty-five and older have Alzheimer's. If you and your parent are concerned about memory, schedule an appointment with the doctor for a thorough examination. You may discover that his failing memory is caused by a condition that can not only be treated but can also be cured.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or JAClark@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.