

Spotlight on Health

Early Assessment of Brain Health

As we grow older, we begin to lose some of the sharpness in thinking that we had when we were younger. We might not immediately recall a person's name or remember our PIN at the ATM. A person's ability to think, learn, and remember are collectively called cognition. Brain Health is a term used to reflect how our cognition is working.

This newsletter will discuss cognition, dementia, and brain health. It will also review ways to help keep your brain healthy and maintain mental sharpness as you age.

Cognitive Impairment and Dementia

Many of us become more forgetful as we age. Sometimes ideas are not as clear as they used to be. Intermittent forgetfulness is sometimes called a "senior moment."¹ But when forgetfulness becomes very common, and we struggle to learn new things, there may be a problem with our ability to think. This is called cognitive impairment.²

Mild cognitive impairment usually begins when we are in our 60s or 70s. But it can be difficult to diagnose. Family members may think something is wrong, but signs may be subtle and missed during a wellness examination. Cognitive impairment can remain mild, or it can progress to dementia. Dementia refers to a decline in memory or thinking skills severe enough to interfere with everyday activities.²

Alzheimer Disease and Other Types of Dementia

Alzheimer disease is the most common type of dementia.³ Between 60% and 80% of people with dementia have Alzheimer disease.³ In the United States, Alzheimer disease affects more than 5 million people. By 2050, that number is expected to increase to 16 million because the population is aging.³

Other types of dementia are associated with conditions such as Parkinson and Huntington disease.⁴ For the most part, these types of dementia cannot be cured. However, in some cases the progression of symptoms can be slowed.⁴

On the other hand, some causes of dementia can be treated and partially, or completely, reversed. These include⁴:

- Drug interactions
- Vitamin B12 deficiency
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Thyroid dysfunction
- Depression
- Autoimmune disease
- Trauma



Ways to Keep Your Mind Sharp^{7,8}

- Be physically active—walk quickly for about 45 minutes 3 times a week
- Eat a healthy diet—low in saturated fat, high in fruits and vegetables
- Drink alcohol in moderation or not at all
- Avoid tobacco and secondhand smoke
- Exercise your brain—learn something new often
- Be social—have some fun with your friends
- Use all your senses—smell the flowers, try new foods
- Repeat what you want to remember
- Believe in yourself—don't buy into myths about aging

Importance of Assessing Brain Health

The ability to think and remember can be tested.⁴ Testing helps identify people who show signs of cognitive impairment. Tests can also measure how severe it is. Experts debate whether all older people (over 65 year of age) should be tested, especially if they do not have signs or symptoms.^{5,6}

The potential benefits of identifying and assessing cognitive impairment and dementia at an early stage include:

- Finding out whether dementia is reversible
- Slowing down the progress of dementia with early treatment
- Allowing participation in clinical trials that test new drugs
- Planning for long-term care
- Managing other medical problems more effectively

How Your Healthcare Provider Can Help

If you are experiencing any problems thinking or remembering, be sure to talk with your healthcare provider. This is especially important if the problems happen often. Your healthcare provider may be able to reassure you that you are only having “senior moments,” or may have testing done to find out if you have cognitive impairment. If your ability to think has slowed, there are ways to help keep your brain sharp (sidebar). If you have cognitive impairment, your healthcare provider can have blood tests done to find out if it is caused by a treatable medical problem (for example, vitamin B12 deficiency).

How the Laboratory Can Help

Quest Diagnostics offers a number of ways to test your brain health. CogniSense™ is an iPad-based application that can measure your thinking and reasoning ability (QuestCogniSense.com). The Dementia, Secondary Causes Panel includes a number of blood tests to see if you may have a treatable medical condition that is affecting your ability to think and remember. Quest also offers tests to determine your risk of having Alzheimer disease (QuestDiagnostics.com/AD).

Additional Information

For more information, visit the Quest Diagnostics CogniSense website at www.QuestCogniSense.com, or these helpful websites:

- **National Institute on Aging:** <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-mild-cognitive-impairment>
- **Alzheimer’s Association:** <https://www.alz.org/>
- **MedlinePlus:** <https://medlineplus.gov/dementia.html>
- **WebMD:** <https://www.webmd.com/brain/types-dementia#1>

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