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Signs of Normal Aging vs. Dementia

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Typical age-related brain changes generally don't affect daily life. However, dementia is a brain condition that causes worsening memory and thinking problems that hinder everyday functioning.

It's common to experience mild cognitive (thinking ability) changes as you age, such as forgetting the names of acquaintances or misplacing objects from time to time. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that you or your loved one is developing dementia.

Read on to understand the effects of aging on a healthy brain and how to differentiate this from possible signs of dementia.

Is dementia just a typical part of aging?

[Dementia](#) isn't simply about forgetfulness. While some dementia-related brain changes may overlap with natural aging, these are generally much more severe and affect your ability to function daily.

However, you may experience what's known as [mild cognitive impairment \(MCI\)](#). This is when your thinking and memory abilities are [noticeably below](#) what's typical for your age, but not enough to be considered dementia.

The following chart from the National Institute on Aging (NIH) [generally summarizes](#) typical aging brain changes, with changes related to MCI and dementia.

Category	Typical aging	MCI	Dementia
memory & recall	occasional minor forgetfulness	more frequent forgetfulness, misplacing of objects, or some difficulty finding words	frequent forgetfulness, misplaced items, repeated questions, and trouble recalling new information
effects on daily life	minor issues like needing a calculator for basic math, but daily life and independence are unaffected	more noticeable but still doesn't disrupt daily tasks or independent living	severe changes affecting daily life and making it hard to manage money, follow directions, or care for oneself
rate of change	changes are relatively stable over time	may be stable, become progressive and degenerative, or even reverse	changes are noticeably progressing and worsening, leading to a decline in the ability to work or care for oneself
personality & behavior	few changes or minor shifts that don't seem out of the ordinary	likely still minor, but may be a bit more noticeable	significant changes to personality and behavior, which may include new agitation, aggression , paranoia , social withdrawal, or hallucinations

Having MCI puts you at a [greater risk](#) of progressing to dementia, but this doesn't happen every time. That said, it may be helpful for your peace of mind to get yourself or your loved one evaluated by a doctor. The sections below explore typical aging versus dementia in more detail.

Get a cognitive assessment through Medicare

Under Medicare Part B or with your Medicare Advantage (Part C) plan, you can undergo a [covered cognitive assessment](#).

As part of this assessment, a doctor will also review your health and medications, evaluate your support system, create a care plan, discuss future care preferences, refer

you to specialists if needed, and connect you with community resources and support services.

Under Medicare Part B, you're responsible for [20%](#) of the cost once you've met your annual deductible. The coinsurance and deductible of Part C plans depend on the specific plan.

What are the signs of typical cognitive aging?

Most people experience some gradual and subtle changes in how they think or remember as they age.

One of the [most common](#) changes is a delay in the time it takes your brain to process information. You may, for example, realize that it takes you longer to learn something new or complete a task that you previously easily accomplished.

Research shows that brain volume can [decrease](#) over time, peaking after age 70. This can result in changes such as:

- a gradual loss of brain matter
- a decrease in brain blood flow
- a decline in chemical messengers like [dopamine](#) and [serotonin](#)
- a decline in the efficiency of brain cells
- a buildup of brain waste
- slower brain cell repair

In addition, overall brain structure changes, such as larger ventricles and wider grooves, can also contribute to memory and thinking issues.

All of this may sound overwhelming, but in practice, if you're experiencing typical signs of aging, it generally looks like a few moments of forgetting a word or a name during a conversation or some occasional unusual moods. This often means your brain is just taking a few extra moments to recall the information or to process your emotions.

For instance, you might get frustrated when you don't remember what you had for lunch yesterday, but once someone reminds you of the restaurant, you remember easily. These types of moments can be annoying, but they are not necessarily concerning.

It's also important to remember that not everyone experiences such changes as they age. Those who experience them will not experience the same changes as everyone else, or they may experience them at different rates.

What are the warning signs of dementia?

Dementia [develops](#) when changes in certain parts of the brain cause nerve cells and their connections to stop functioning properly. Dementia is also not a single condition, but an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different syndromes, such as:

- [Alzheimer's disease](#)
- [vascular dementia](#)
- [Lewy body dementia](#)
- [frontotemporal dementia](#)

» **Learn more:** [The types of dementia](#)

Because different areas of the brain can be involved with each type of dementia, the symptoms do not always look the same.

One of the first signs tends to be memory loss, but not in every case. Depending on which parts of the brain the condition affects, dementia can significantly affect:

- judgment and decision making
- language and communication
- attention and concentration
- the ability to understand your environment
- mood, personality, and social behavior

Some symptoms that [might develop](#) include:

- frequent forgetfulness or [confusion](#)
- trouble with words or conversations

- difficulty with directions or managing money
- repeating things or using odd words
- taking longer with daily tasks
- developing hallucinations
- acting impulsively
- seeming emotionally distant
- having issues with balance

The key to differentiating dementia from typical brain aging, or even MCI, is that these changes are much more significant, much more of a hindrance to your daily life, and clearly worsen over time.

Takeaway

It's typical to have some mild changes in thinking or memory with age. However, dementia involves more serious changes that affect daily life.

Mild [cognitive impairment](#) (MCI) falls between typical aging and dementia, where your thinking and memory are noticeably affected, but still allow for independence.

MCI can increase the risk of dementia, so it's a good idea to talk with a doctor if you have concerns. That said, having MCI, or milder cognitive changes, doesn't mean you'll develop [dementia](#).

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Alina Sharon is a Chicago-based editor for Medical News Today, Healthline, Healthgrades, and HelloMedicare focusing on health, wellness, and Medicare content. She has a master's degree in journalism and has worked as a writer and editor for over 10 years for U.S. and international media. She's excited to dedicate herself to her passion for creating informative and reliable content that makes it easier for people to navigate their healthcare. Outside of work, she's also the mom of two rambunctious boys. Connect with her on LinkedIn.

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