

My Medical Care

What treatments are there for memory loss?

From Alice, living with dementia:

“Whenever I go to the doctor’s or something, I just tell them my situation, that I have Alzheimer’s. I just get it out. And then the people are really very nice and gentle.”



From Sarah, living with mild cognitive impairment:

“Today at the eye doctor, I just decided I wanted more information than they give you. So I said, ‘I’m diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment – is there anything you can give me to take with me?’



“When the technician came in to schedule my surgery, the doctor said, ‘Sarah has a little memory issue, and she’d like to have a copy of all her scans and everything.’ It just fell into place.”

In these pages, you will learn more about medical care for people living with memory loss. We will explain treatment options, rehabilitation and therapy, other health concerns, and ways memory loss might affect aspects of your healthcare. To learn more about staying healthy, also read “My Daily Life,” chapter 5 of this handbook.

Your care team at the Memory and Brain Wellness Center will partner with your primary care provider (PCP) to create a special care plan for you. We will talk with your PCP about your visit and give you a report that you can take with you. We want to support you and your PCP so that you receive the very best care for your overall health.

Key Points in This Chapter

- *Treatment for memory loss focuses on easing symptoms and helping you feel better.*
- *Rehabilitation can help you cope with memory changes.*
- *Treating other health problems may help your memory and thinking.*
- *Memory loss, and the medicines you take to treat it, can affect other aspects of your healthcare.*

What can I expect from treatment?

Some causes of memory problems can be treated and resolved. These include depression, or a lack of certain vitamins or minerals.

If these issues are resolved or ruled out, but memory problems keep getting worse, the real cause could be a *neurodegenerative disease*. This type of disease damages brain cells over time.

At this time, there is no cure for this type of disease. We cannot stop the ongoing damage to your brain cells. Instead, we focus on treatments that help you remember better, think more clearly, feel good, and stay healthy.

Most times, treatment goals include:

- Easing your **symptoms**.
- Creating a **care plan** to help you cope and live well. This plan may include rehabilitation, education, support groups, and more.
- Treating **other health problems** that could make your memory or thinking worse.

What medicines help treat symptoms?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved these drugs to treat the memory and thinking symptoms of Alzheimer's disease:

- *Cholinesterase inhibitors* such as donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon), and galantamine (Razadyne). These medicines:
 - Stop the breakdown of *acetylcholine*, a chemical in the brain that helps attention and memory
 - Help your brain cells work better by keeping your levels of acetylcholine high
 - Work for about half the people who take them, keeping their symptoms from getting worse for 6 to 12 months
- *Memantine* (Namenda). This medicine:
 - Is often prescribed if a person has more advanced symptoms
 - Controls the activity of *glutamate*, a chemical involved in learning and memory
 - May help reduce symptoms in the middle and late stages of the disease
- *Namzaric*. This medicine:
 - Is a single pill that combines the 2 kinds of medicines listed above

Do these medicines work for all types of dementia?

These medicines may be used to treat symptoms of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, such as *vascular dementia* and *Lewy body dementia*. But these medicines do not help treat a type of dementia called *frontotemporal dementia*.

These medicines are also not used if you have *mild cognitive impairment*. This condition is not dementia, but it does involve problems with memory, language, thinking, or judgment.

We will talk with you about what medicines may work best for you. Your PCP may also prescribe other medicines if you have other health issues that affect memory and thinking. Talk with your PCP if you have questions.

How can rehabilitation help?

Most people think that rehabilitation (“rehab”) is to help people recover after an injury, a stroke, or surgery. But rehab can also be very helpful for people living with memory loss and dementia.

Rehab specialists work together to support your physical, mental, environmental, and emotional needs. Goals of rehab may include:

- Helping you stay strong, flexible, and able to move around. You may learn exercises that help with muscle strength and heart health.
- Teaching you to use *adaptive devices* and systems that help with daily activities, such as finding your way around, managing your medicines, and taking care of finances.
- Helping you communicate with others.
- Helping you learn how to use calendars, cues, and other memory aids.
- Finding ways to help you stay involved in work or volunteering.
- Helping you stay active in your hobbies, interests, and leisure activities.

At the Memory and Brain Wellness Center, we work with physical therapists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and other rehab providers. Our goal is to help you live as well as possible, and to help you adapt when your needs change. Rehab can be very helpful for both you and your care partner.

Do other health problems affect memory and thinking?

Other health problems can affect your memory, thinking abilities, and how you feel. Treating these problems can help you think a bit more clearly, feel better, and get more out of life.

If you have other health problems, we may treat you for them. Or, we may talk with your PCP and suggest a care plan.

Health issues that can affect memory and thinking include:

Depression and Anxiety

We all feel sad or worried sometimes. But depression and anxiety are serious issues that can make it harder for you to remember or to think clearly. They can also affect your sleep, your diet, or your desire to stay involved in activities. It is important to treat depression and anxiety. There are very safe medicines that can help.

Sleep Disorders

Getting good sleep is very important for memory, and for your physical and mental health. While you sleep, memories are formed and your body may get rid of certain proteins that cause damage to the brain.

Pain, bladder problems, or *sleep apnea* are some issues that might keep you up at night. If you are having trouble sleeping, talk with your PCP. Find out what is keeping you from sleeping, and what treatments can help.

Delirium

Delirium is a condition in which you suddenly become confused, drowsy, or less aware. The symptoms may look like dementia, but they happen all at once and are caused by a different health issue.



If you are having trouble sleeping, talk with your PCP.

Delirium can be caused by dehydration, an infection, or a side effect of a drug you are taking. People with dementia have a higher risk for delirium.

If your family or caregivers see that you suddenly are having much more problems talking or doing daily tasks, they should take you to your PCP or the emergency department **right away**. If delirium is the cause, it can usually be treated.

Seizures

When a person has a *seizure*, their brain activity changes. Their thinking is affected and their arms or legs may jerk. This can last for a few minutes before the person returns to normal.

Seizures may be linked to Alzheimer's or similar diseases, or other causes. Most times, seizures can be controlled with medicine.

Thyroid Disorders

The thyroid is a gland in your neck. If there are problems in the thyroid, it can make too much, or too little, of the thyroid hormone. This may cause memory loss and mood changes.

A simple blood test can show how your thyroid is doing. Thyroid problems are treated with medicine.

What do I need to know about memory loss and my general healthcare?

To help all your healthcare providers give you the best care, and to get the most out of your visits:

- **Tell your medical, dental, and vision providers that you have memory loss.** When your providers know about your memory loss, it helps them give you the best care.
- **Advocate for yourself.** Care providers are often busy. Most are learning how to better serve people with dementia, but some may not take the time to focus on you. They may assume you cannot speak or decide for yourself, and may start talking to your care partner instead. If this happens, your care partner can politely remind the doctor to talk directly with you.

- **Bring your medicines with you to every healthcare visit.**

This includes drugs your doctors prescribed, medicines you bought at the drugstore (over-the-counter), vitamins, and other supplements. These are important to review because some medicines:

- May make memory or thinking worse and should not be taken if you have memory problems
- Can work against the medicines you take to help your memory
- Might interact with your medicines and cause harmful side effects

Your providers need to know everything you are taking so that they can avoid these problems.

- **Know that having surgery may affect your memory loss.**

Surgery is very stressful for your body and your brain. It is hardest on you if you need *general anesthesia* (drugs that make you sleep). It can take some time after surgery for the effects of these drugs to go away.

Also, your medicines for memory loss may need to change for a short time after surgery or during your hospital stay. If you are planning a surgery and will stay overnight in the hospital afterward, ask our team to review the medicines we have prescribed.

