

Answer isn't always on the 'tip of the tongue' for older adults

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Has your memory failed you today, such as struggling to recall a word that's "on the tip of your tongue?" If so, you're not alone.

New University of Michigan research indicates that "tip-of-the-tongue" errors happen often to adults ages 65-92. In a study of 105 healthy, highly-educated [older adults](#), 61 percent reported this memory mishap.

The study's participants completed a checklist of the memory errors made in the last 24 hours, as well as several other tests. About half of them reported making other errors that may be related to absent-mindedness, such as having to re-read a sentence because they forgot what it said, or forgetting where they placed an item.

The findings, which appear in the journal *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition*, may help brain-training programs target the [memory problems](#) people experience in daily life.

"Right now, many training programs focus on the age differences in memory and thinking that we see in laboratory studies," said Cindy Lustig, U-M [psychology professor](#) and the study's senior author.

"However, those may not translate to the performance failures that are most common in [everyday life](#)."

When people are tested in the lab and have nothing to rely on but their own memories, [young adults](#) typically do better than older adults, she said. However, when these studies are conducted in real-world settings,

older adults sometimes outperform young adults at things like remembering appointments because the former are likely to use memory supports such as calendars, lists and alarms.

"When we looked at how people performed on standard [laboratory tests](#), we found the usual age differences," she said. "People in their 80s and 90s performed worse than those in their 60s and early 70s."

In contrast, no increase in daily memory errors was found based on age.

Meanwhile, researchers hope that a better understanding of the errors people are still making can improve training program efforts.

"We wanted to identify which errors still occur despite changes people might be making in their environment and routine," Lustig said. "That's where it may be especially important to change the person."

Lustig cautioned that an elderly person occasionally forgetting a name does not mean he's in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease or other dementias.

"Everybody forgets," she said. "However, our findings suggest that certain types of memory errors may be especially important to monitor for increases, which then should be discussed with a clinician."

Lustig said future research should identify how people change their lives to avoid errors. If people restrict their activities to avoid memory errors, it could affect their independence.

Provided by University of Michigan

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