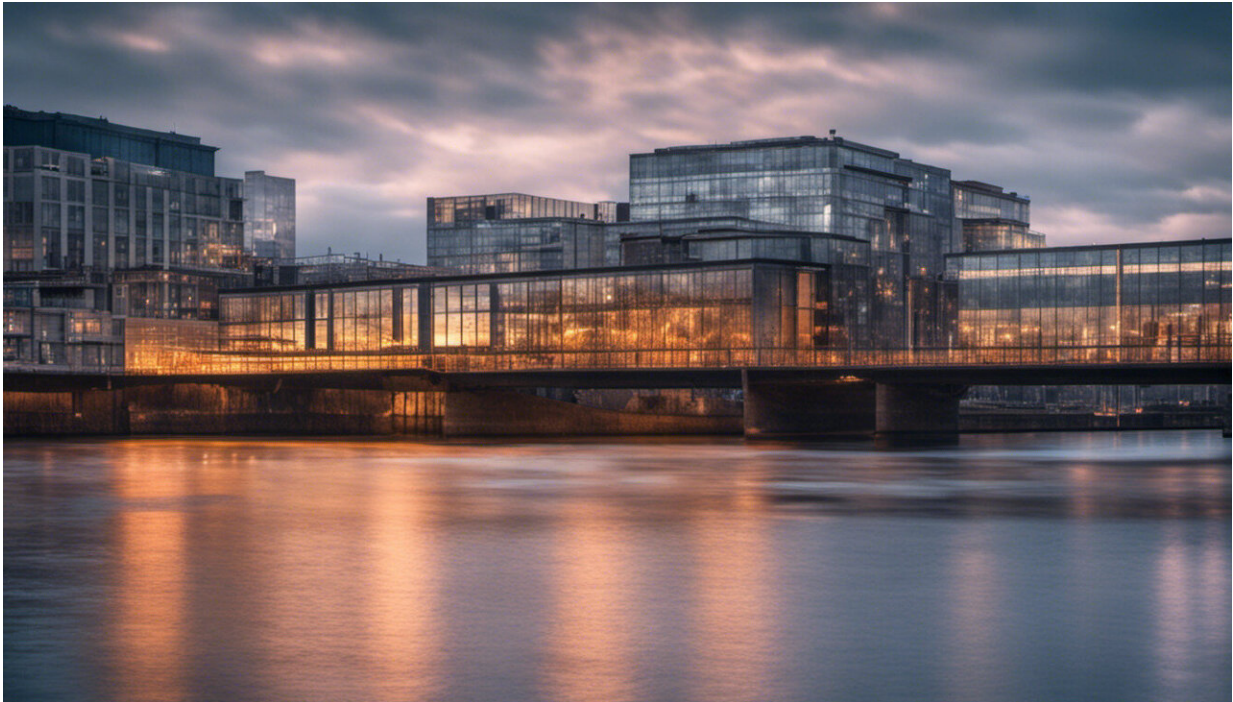


When memory loss should concern you

December 1 2015, by Lauren Woods



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Although there is currently no cure for Alzheimer's Disease, Dr. Patrick Coll of UConn's Center on Aging recommends early screening for those with memory loss, to diagnose whether it is caused by dementia and try to slow its progression.

UConn Health's Memory Assessment Program, part of the Center on Aging, screens patients for dementia, a set of cognitive brain diseases of

which Alzheimer's is the most common form.

Dementia begins by causing a decline in short-term memory but progresses to affect many other aspects of brain function. The biggest risk factor for developing dementia is old age. About half of those over the age of 90 will experience some symptoms of dementia.

Cardiovascular disease such as stroke or mini-strokes are also a risk factor.

But Alzheimer's disease has a different genesis: It's caused by the gradual buildup of a bad type of amyloid protein in the brain. This buildup slows the brain's function over time, leading to permanent cognitive impairment and [memory loss](#), and is eventually fatal. In fact, Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S., not far behind heart disease, cancer, and stroke, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Though there is unfortunately no current cure for Alzheimer's disease, there are treatments that can slow the progression of the illness.

Possible [warning signs](#) and symptoms of dementias include:

- Misplacing things very frequently, with the inability to retrace your steps.
- Not remembering newly shared information, such as a significant life event.
- Confusion about where you are, or what year it is.
- Inability to carry out your usual daily life tasks.
- New difficulty speaking, remembering certain words or familiar things, or writing.
- A repeated decrease in decision-making or judgment.
- A strong and unusual change in mood and behavior.
- A new social withdrawal and from activities once enjoyed.

"It is very important for those experiencing the warning signs of memory

loss or potential dementia to seek medical assessment as close as possible to the onset of their symptoms," says Dr. Coll, program director of the James E.C. Walker, M.D. Memory Assessment Program at UConn's Center on Aging. "Early screening is important. The sooner you are aware of memory loss, the sooner specialists can put an action plan together to identify what may be causing your memory issues, diagnose if it is dementia, and try to slow its progression."

Coll stresses that some memory loss, like forgetting where you put your car keys, is just a normal part of aging. However, some people may develop significant memory loss issues that start with subtle changes that seem like a normal part of aging but then progress more rapidly to be truly abnormal.

"Concerning memory loss is not just forgetting where you put your keys," says Coll. "Forgetting a significant life event is more concerning. You should not be forgetting something like a family member having had a recent illness or a vacation you had two weeks ago."

UConn Health's Memory Assessment Program screens patients for dementia with an in-depth interview process. Its doctors also rule out other health issues, such as a thyroid issue or a B-12 deficiency, that may be causing a temporary memory-related issue. Then a neuropsychologist measures a patient's cognitive function and compares it to the norm of others of the same age group and education level.

In some cases, however, dementia can often only be identified slowly over time through professional tracking of cognitive changes at six-month or one-year intervals.

Although current treatments are less than ideal, Coll believes that more effective prevention and therapy interventions are on the horizon. Advanced brain imaging will soon help more clearly identify those

patients at risk for developing dementias, though the usefulness of these tools will depend on the availability of better and more effective treatments.

In the meantime, Coll says there are three steps you can take now to decrease your risk of developing [dementia](#):

1. Practice a heart-healthy lifestyle: Remember, what is good for your heart's health is good for your brain's health. Make sure your blood pressure is not high and is under control. Eat a heart-healthy diet and exercise daily. Do not smoke tobacco and do not consume alcohol excessively.
2. Stay socially active: Make sure to be socially engaged and have daily conversations with friends, family, co-workers, or peers.
3. Perform brain-stimulating activities: Limit passive television watching, and instead read newspapers, the Internet, and books, or – even better – join a book club. Crossword puzzles and word games can also be beneficial. Anything that challenges your mind to learn new information or skills is good exercise for the brain. The old adage is as true for mental health as it is for physical health: use it or lose it.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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