

# People expect their memory to fade as early as their 50s

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Credit: Heriot-Watt University

People across the UK expect their memory to worsen in their 50s, according to new research from Heriot-Watt University.

The results from the "What Keeps You Sharp?" survey, released today, reveals the majority of those asked believe lifestyle and genetics are equally important contributors to the changes they might experience.

Almost nine out of 10 people are of the opinion that there are things they can do to maintain or improve their thinking skills; however, when asked if they knew what those things were, less than six in 10 were sure.

More than 3000 people aged between 40 to 98 years-old responded to the study from across the UK.

Dr Alan Gow, Associate Professor in Psychology at Heriot-Watt, who led the research, said: "The results give us a good indication of what people expect to happen to their thinking skills as they age. There's some positive news: for example, the majority of people believe it might be possible to maintain or even improve their thinking skills as they grow older. Hopefully that means people are interested in knowing more about the lifestyle and behavioural factors that could help protect their thinking skills with age.

"There are also some things we need to consider in more detail though, as fewer people were sure what kinds of things might be good for protecting thinking skills with age."

The report is intended to be used by members of the public, older peoples' groups and charities, and as a reference for GPs and other health professionals. It links some of the beliefs the public have about the topic to what other research in the area suggests, and directs people to resources so they can follow-up to get more information.

Dr Gow added: "The report gives a very brief overview of some of the things people understand about how our thinking skills might change as we age. The intention with the report is to help people start to think about their brain health, in the same way we've become more knowledgeable over recent generations about managing our heart health or lowering our risk of certain cancers, for example."

The "What Keeps You Sharp?" survey was conducted as the first stage in a three-year study, supported by Velux Stiftung, a Swiss charitable foundation that supports research on healthy ageing. The overall study is exploring how increasing mental, physical or social engagement might improve cognitive skills in [older people](#). The study is ongoing and continues to recruit adults aged 65 and over in and around Edinburgh.

Dr Gow concluded: "Based on the survey, we know that many people have concerns about how their thinking skills might change as they get older. We need to ensure we can talk about those concerns as clearly as possible, help people identify the things that might be good - or not so good - for their brain health, and ensure support exists for everyone to remain as mentally, socially or physically engaged in later life."

The survey has attracted praise from leading charity, Age Scotland. Brian Sloan, Chief Executive, said: "This research gives a fascinating insight into our thoughts on ageing and how we can keep our minds sharp in later life. It's not surprising that losing their memory and thinking skills are among people's biggest worries as they get older. At the same time, most people believe their wisdom and knowledge will be less affected as they age.

"Although some changes are out with our control, it's good to see that the vast majority is aware of links between lifestyle factors and [brain health](#). However, there's still some confusion about exactly what these are and we need to do more to educate [people](#). Staying physically and socially active, eating a healthy diet, and getting enough sleep can all help us protect our thinking skills.

"It's also important to remember that memory decline isn't an inevitable part of ageing and could be linked to dementia or other conditions. If anyone has concerns about their memory or [thinking skills](#), then we would urge them to visit their GP."

The launch of the public report coincides with the first research publication based on the [survey](#) results, available online now in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*

**More information:** Eleftheria Vaportzis et al. People's Beliefs and Expectations About How Cognitive Skills Change with Age: Evidence From a UK-Wide Aging Survey, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jagp.2018.03.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2018.03.016)

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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