

Everyday activities could yield subtle dementia warning signs

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Diagram of the brain of a person with Alzheimer's Disease. Credit: Wikipedia/public domain.

Subtle changes in driving habits, computer use and medication routines could provide early clues to the development of Alzheimer's disease.

A researcher at the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center is studying all three by using sensors to monitor volunteers for changes in their [daily activities](#).

While Alzheimer's is an incurable brain disorder, [early detection](#) could allow people to receive support services or therapies to slow its onset, said Adriana Seelye, a VA neuropsychologist leading the research.

"These kind of subtle cues are not picked up early on when interventions could be put in place," she said. "A lot of times, people don't come to our attention until there is a crisis."

Seelye's previous research showed that changes in computer use and mouse movements could predict [mild cognitive impairment](#), which can be a precursor to Alzheimer's. Another study found that people with MCI were more conservative and predictable drivers.

Now she wants to assess which behavior changes are most predictive, or whether combinations of changes offer the most accurate clues. She received money from the VA for one study, and last week won a grant from the National Institutes of Health for a second. She is recruiting 130 senior volunteers who don't have dementia. Volunteers in the NIH study will be tracked for four years.

Wrist-worn fitness trackers will measure sleep and movement. In-car computer data will reveal changes over time in average speed, highway usage and right versus left turn decisions.

Other researchers have examined changes in speech and voice, among other characteristics. Early detection methods are needed, Seelye said.

Alzheimer's symptoms "develop very slowly," Seelye said. "This makes it very difficult for us as clinicians."

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