

Evaluate Memory Changes As Early As Possible

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Purpose of Session: Evaluate Memory Changes Early

*The following session, **Evaluate Memory Changes As Early As Possible**, discusses the importance of an early medical evaluation whenever a person begins to have signs of difficulty with memory, thinking, and/or understanding and speaking to others. An early medical evaluation may lead to recommendations resulting in a return to normal function or slowing down decline.*

The key point is to be aware of changes in memory or thinking abilities and to have these changes evaluated as soon as possible by a doctor.

Mild Memory Changes

People, who notice occasional struggles to remember details such as whether a task was completed or the name of a person, may be experiencing a change in memory health. It may become difficult to select from many choices, such as which errand to do first. The first sign may occur at a restaurant when they are adding up the bill and trying to figure out the tip.

Changes in memory or thinking skills (such as understanding, speaking, solving problems, planning ahead, making choices, or using ones hands to perform a task) may begin to show up as a difficulty keeping up during a conversation with friends. Or, the first sign may be starting many tasks and not finishing any.

In a large group of people with many activities occurring at the same time, the person with short-term memory problems and some difficulty with language skills may struggle to understand the flow of topics or to answer a simple question. A teacher with new thinking (cognition) problems may lecture easily on old material but struggle to explain the recently published research findings on the topic or to answer unexpected questions from students.

At the end of a long trip, the driver who is having memory and organization difficulties may struggle when faced with following a new detour because of major road repairs.

Mild memory or thinking changes may show up as an inability to think clearly and make good decisions. Thus, a bill may be paid twice. Or the credit card may be left behind a few times at different restaurant.

Noticing Change in Ability

The important point is that there is a change from the person's usual ability to remember, communicate, or think carefully. The change in ability may be noticed by the person who is having the difficulty. Or, instead, the change may be noticed only by a loved one who lives with the person and not the person with the disorder. Sometimes it is the family member who lives at a distant and who visits every few months who notices the change.

Medical Check-Up As Soon As Possible

Any notice of such a change should lead to an appointment with the family doctor for a medical check-up as soon as possible. The change in ability may result from a health change that is easy to fix or easier to manage when caught early on. The physician or other health provider may identify a health condition that is fixable or manageable enough to slow down or change the course of the disease.

Even if the changes represent a progressive condition such as Alzheimer's disease, uncovering the possible diagnosis early on may help to preserve memory and thinking skills for a longer period of time. This is the approach of: "A stitch in time may save (the need for) nine."

Signs of Mild Memory or Thinking Changes

- Difficulty remembering appointments
- Difficulty recalling the names of friends, neighbors and family members
- Difficulty recalling whether a task was just completed the day before
- Difficulty keeping up with all the steps to a task
- Difficulty planning and doing an activity such as a party with friends or family
- Difficulty choosing the bill to pay first, the right coat or shoes, to wear, etc.
- Different behavior: restless, quick to get angry, constant hunger (especially for sweets), withdrawn, untidy, poor grooming, etc.
- Buying items and forgetting there is plenty at home
- Unable to keep up with all the conversation when others are talking
- Struggling with work or home tasks that used to be routine and easy; needing help or hints about the next step in a task
- Loss of interest in meeting with friends or doing activities

Importance of Short-term Memory and Thinking

Short-term memory and thinking functions are important for keeping up with all the responsibilities, relationships and activities in ones daily life. Short-term memory is important for holding new information including details, such as who, what, when, and where. It is important to remember information about current activities such as what you just did, to know what comes next, to move on to the next steps, and to stop when a task is done. The task could be preparing a meal or putting on socks and shoes. Language skills are essential for interactions, whether it is a relationship with a family member, business partner, or grocery clerk.

Importance of Early Medical Exam

With estimates of 8 million people in the U.S. with Mild Cognitive Impairment (a mild decline in short-term memory with no other thinking difficulties) and 5 million with Alzheimer's disease, treating a memory disorder early is essential. An early medical evaluation of a memory or thinking disorder may lead to finding a fixable health condition and a return to healthy memory or thinking abilities. Or, the doctor may be able to slow down the ongoing decline with medicine, such as changing blood pressure or heart medicine to improve ones blood circulation and heart beat. The doctor may recommend changes in lifestyle such as a better diet, drinking 10 to 12 glasses of water a day, reducing negative stress, and increasing daily exercise.

Reasons for the memory problems may result from depression, high anxiety, stress, or having a mild infection that temporarily impairs memory. Fatigue, loss of sleep over several days, other health problems may also impair memory or clear thinking. Treating these conditions and improving stressful circumstances may help the memory and thinking skills return to normal levels of functioning.

With medical help some people may maintain short-term memory difficulties, staying at the same level of decline with no further changes, as time passes. Others, despite their best and healthiest efforts, appear to convert over time to slow, progressive declines in memory and other thinking functions. However, with good medical care, the rate of progressive decline may slow down.

Slowing down, reversing or preventing loss of memory or thinking function benefits the patient, the family and society. It means that the patient will be able to maintain self-sufficiency longer. It also represents enormous savings of caregiver tasks, energy, time and money.

A Full Medical Exam

Both the person with the memory problem and at least one other individual who knows that person well should attend the clinical appointment for the medical evaluation. Sometimes additional family members or friends will want to attend the appointment. An early full medical exam should include a summary of the situations and behavior where there were struggles with memory or other cognitive functions; this summary provides a history of "problem events".

Also important in the evaluation are a medical and surgical history, a medical exam, a neurological exam, a psychological exam (including a screening for depression and anxiety) and a mental status exam [a neuropsychological evaluation of cognitive (thinking skills) and memory functions]. Also, the medical evaluation should include a list of medicines, vitamins, minerals, herbs, and other supplements taken daily and occasionally, alcohol intake, and tobacco use. In addition, the medical history of directly-related family members such as parents and siblings, offers important information. The doctors also need results from laboratory tests looking at blood and urine and, typically, an MRI or a CT which provide pictures of the brain tissue.

A complete medical evaluation may uncover a simple health problem that is easy to fix. For example, low levels of thyroid hormone, Vitamin B12 or other B Vitamins will lead to problems with short-term memory. Thyroid medicines or vitamin supplements can replace low levels to help restore health to the brain and rest of the body.

Infections, dealing with pain, dehydration, inadequate sleep, and long-stress are among many the many problems that interfere with good memory and thinking functions. Some medicines important for heart conditions, allergies, pain, or urine incontinence may interfere with memory function.

If the health problems leading to the short-term memory loss have been going on for a short time, such as 2 to 6 months, fixing the health problems may return the memory function to normal levels though it may take several months for that recovery to occur. If the health problems have been going on for more than 6 months, fixing the health problems may improve short-term memory function but may not return it to the previous, normal level.

Healthy Lifestyle

With a healthy lifestyle many people may be able to improve memory function, maintain the current level of memory function, or slow down progressive decline. A healthy lifestyle includes good nutrition, drinking 10 to 12 glasses of water a day unless a physician limits liquid intake. Daily physical exercise for at least 20 to 30 minutes (5 days a week) is very important for brain health.

Brain Exercise

Also important to brain health is daily brain exercise such as doing crossword puzzles, reading and discussing the reading material, visiting with friends, doing tasks, working on enjoyable projects, developing leisure activities, playing a musical instrument, listening to music with and without lyrics (words), doing or enjoying art, taking photographs, looking at photo albums and remembering the details of the pictures and people. Trying to learn something new every day and doing a routine activity such as brushing ones hair or teeth a different way by using the opposite hand, stimulate brain cells.

Tips for Brain Health

1. Good nutrition; grains, fresh fruits and vegetables every day
2. 10 to 12 glasses of water a day unless a physician limits liquid
3. Daily physical exercise for at least 20 minutes at a time and at least 5 days a week
4. Daily brain exercise: crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, math puzzles, sudoku, etc.
5. Daily fun activities; time with others and time alone
6. Follow your physician's advice to take care of your health
7. Read and discuss the information with someone or with a group of friends
8. Visit with friends whom you enjoy; make new friends (your age, older than you and younger than you)
9. Follow a daily routine with some variety to increase interest
10. Work on enjoyable projects or hobbies
11. Learn something new every day: start a new leisure activity or project; make a new friend

12. Do something a new way. Switch hands to: brush the dog or cat, water the plants, wipe off the counter-tops, etc.
13. Play or listen to music [with or without lyrics (words)]; play a musical instrument
14. Do art or look at art: take photographs, look at photo albums and remember the details of the pictures and people; look at paintings and discuss them
15. Go outside every day the weather permits
16. Touch a plant, tree or flower blossom every day (indoors or outdoors)
17. Reduce stress; do relaxation exercises
18. Do something for someone else every day
19. Strengthen yourself spiritually

Variety in brain exercise keeps the connections between brain cells active and helps to increase the number of brain cell connections. Just as a tree in springtime sprouts new branches, brain cells with the proper stimulation can grow new branches (new connections). The expanded number of brain cell connections may increase the chances of the brain functioning better and longer even when poor circulation or weakening cells in the brain tissue result in decreases in thinking and memory abilities. The extra connections act as brain back-up cells, essentially a brain reserve (sometimes called cognitive reserves).

Medical Follow-Up

The physician may suggest trying a medicine to improve memory function and to slow the rate of decline that is occurring. There are no clear, strong studies that show that the medicines (anticholinesterase medicines such as aricept©, exelon© or razadyne©, or the neuron protectives such as ginkgo biloba or namenda©) used to try to improve functioning in people with Alzheimer's disease are useful for people who have a mild memory problem. However, some physicians may recommend such medicines to see if they may be of any help.

To determine if decline is ongoing and if safety is a concern, people with mild memory or thinking problems should have a medical check-up every three to nine months or so. If medical findings suggest a continuing problem with memory or other thinking functions, the physician may recommend other therapies for maintaining or improving skills. In some cases, the physician may set limits on some activities such as not using sharp or complicated tools and not driving any kind of motor vehicle.

Summary

Whenever a person suspects changes in memory or thinking ability, a medical evaluation should occur as soon as possible. The physician may uncover fixable causes of the decline in memory and may recommend changes. Treating an infection, a thyroid or vitamin deficiency, or other conditions and recommending a new medicine may result in the person returning to full healthy functioning. These recommendations may lead also to full memory functioning.

Healthful changes in lifestyle such as good nutrition, drinking plenty of water every day, daily physical exercise, daily brain exercise, and reducing stress may lead to better memory function or may help to avoid further decline in memory. Careful medical monitoring, developing ways to deal with the memory problems and planning ahead for lifestyle changes will help people deal most effectively with a health condition and slow down the process of decline.

The following table lists some basic national and Florida-wide sources that provide more information:

National Resources

1. AlzOnline (866)260-2466 www.AlzOnline.net
2. Alzheimer’s Association (800)272-3900 www.alz.org
3. ElderLocator (800)677-1116 www.eldercare.gov

Florida Resources: Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA)

1. Florida DOEA (850) 414-2000
2. Florida Elder Helpline (800) 963-5337

Additional information and references are available on ***Mild Cognitive Impairment*** on the web site www.AlzOnline.net. The information on ***Mild Cognitive Impairment*** may provide further details to improve understanding about short-term memory loss as well as provide more suggestions about dealing with mild memory problems.