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## Know the 10 Warning Signs, Part 1, 1–5

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*Maybe it's something else.*

That's what might come to mind if an older person begins to lose her memory, repeat herself, see things that aren't there, lose her way on routes she's traveled for decades. Maybe it's not dementia. And sometimes, thankfully, it is indeed some other problem, something that mimics the cognitive destruction of Alzheimer's disease or another dementia—but, unlike dementia, is treatable and fixable.

**Sudden changes** in a person's mental state in the course of a few days or weeks, are not typical of a degenerative disease.

- Depression and anxiety are among the leading culprits. Like dementia, they can interfere with the ability to concentrate and remember.
- Thyroid problems are suspect as well. The thyroid has a huge effect on the brain and can be relatively easily tested for and relatively easily fixed with daily medication.
- Vitamin deficiencies probably qualify as the most hoped-for scenario. Cognitive problems caused by lack of vitamin B1 (thiamine) or B12 are reversible with pills or injections.
- Heavy drinking also causes memory loss. After years of alcoholism, one may not be able to repair the damage, but one can prevent it from getting worse.

Older people can suffer from any of these problems along with the actual symptoms of dementia. Treating secondary causes may at least slow, although not stop, the progression of cognitive decline. Often medical professionals will scan the brain, do blood tests, and look for other conditions that may be causing dementia-

like symptoms in the event that treatment of these can be effective.



On the other hand, realistically, it might *not* be something else. Even though the list of other possible explanations is long, so are the odds against restoring a patient to normal functioning. When it looks like dementia, most of the time it is.

Almost 40 percent of people over the age of 65 experience some form of memory loss. When there is no underlying medical condition causing the memory loss, it is known as “age-associated memory impairment,” which is considered a part of the normal aging process. However, diseases like Alzheimer's and other dementias are different and they progress very slowly over time.

Age-associated memory impairment and dementia can be differentiated in a number of ways. Part 1 of this two-part discussion addresses the differences between normal aging and dementia. Please note, however, the information presented here is **not** a diagnostic tool.

The first symptoms of progressive dementia may vary from person to person. Memory loss is typically among the first signs of cognitive impairment related to progressive dementia. As the disease progresses, people experience even greater memory loss as well as other cognitive difficulties.



## Tips & Tools

The first step in following up on symptoms is finding a doctor you feel comfortable with.

### 10 Warning Signs:

1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks
4. Confusion with time or place
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
6. New problems with words in speaking or writing
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
8. Decreased or poor judgment
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities
10. Changes in mood and personality.

An early diagnosis of dementia provides a range of benefits for the individuals who are diagnosed, as well as for their loved ones.



The Alzheimer's Association has created a list of warning signs to help in the early identification of Alzheimer's disease, MCI, and related dementias. Here we will

look at warning signs 1–5.

#### 1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life

One of the most common signs of Alzheimer's disease, especially in the early stage, is forgetting recently learned information. Other signs include forgetfulness of important dates or events, repetition of narratives or asking for the same information over and over, an increasing need to rely on memory aids (e.g., reminder notes, white boards, or electronic devices), or the need for family members to assist in tasks that were once handled personally.

**What is a typical age-related change?** *Occasionally forgetting a name or appointment, but remembering them later.*

#### 2. Challenges in planning or solving problems

Some people may experience changes in their ability to develop and follow a plan or work with numbers. They may have trouble following a familiar recipe or keeping track of the monthly bills. They may have difficulty concentrating and take much longer to do things than they did before. **What is a typical age-related change?** *Making occasional errors when balancing a checkbook, but being able to recognize and correct it.*

#### 3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work, or at leisure

People with Alzheimer's often find it hard to complete daily tasks. Sometimes, they may have trouble driving to a familiar location, completing chores correctly, managing a budget at work, or remembering the rules of a favorite game.

**What is a typical age-related change?** *Occasionally needing help to use the settings on the microwave or to record a television show.*

#### 4. Confusion with time or place

People with Alzheimer's can lose track of dates, seasons, and the passage of time. They may have trouble understanding something if it is not happening immediately. Sometimes they may forget where they are or how they even got there.

**What is a typical age-related change?** *Getting confused about the day of the week but figuring it out later.*

#### 5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships

For some, the onset of visual problems is a sign of Alzheimer's. They may have difficulty reading, judging distance, or determining color or contrast, which, in turn, may cause problems with driving.

**What is a typical age-related change?** *Vision changes related to cataracts.*

If you notice any of the [10 warning signs](#) of Alzheimer's disease in yourself or someone you know, schedule an appointment with a doctor. An early diagnosis of dementia will provide a range of benefits for the individuals who are diagnosed, as well as for their loved ones.

**The June 2019 issue of *Tips & Tools* will examine and discuss warning signs 6–10.**

Normal Aging	Progressive Dementia
Making a bad decision once in a while	Making poor judgments and decisions a lot of the time
Missing a monthly payment	Problems taking care of monthly bills
Forgetting which day it is and remembering it later	Losing track of the date or time of year
Sometimes forgetting which word to use	Trouble having a conversation
Losing things from time to time	Misplacing things often and being unable to find them