

Worried

about

your

memory?



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### **Acknowledgements**

This booklet was written by Kate Fearnley. Thanks are due to members of the Senior Citizens' Forum (Edinburgh West) and the Pilton Elderly Project; Dr Neill Anderson; Professor Jon Evans; Maruska Greenwood; Pauline Halliday; Lindsay Kinnaird; Ruth Lang; Richard Leckerman; Neil McGrory; Angela McLeod; Lorna McTernan and Evelyn Ralston.

Many thanks are also due to the Alzheimer Scotland Information Guidelines Working Group, namely Fiona Borrowman, Programme Manager, Mental Health and Wellbeing in Later Life and Dementia, NHS Health Scotland; Alister Edmond, Dementia Link Nurse, Forth Valley; Dr Ali El-Ghorr, ICP Programme Resource Manager, NHS Quality Improvement Scotland; Lynda Hogg, Member of the Scottish Dementia Working Group; Dr J D Jurgens, formerly Consultant Old Age Psychiatrist, Bonnybridge Day Hospital; Jan Killeen, Policy Director, Alzheimer Scotland; Anne Macarthur, Carer; Isabel Marr, Patient Services Manager, Older Peoples' Services, Ayrshire and Arran Primary Care Trust; Anne McWhinnie, Training and Community Project Manager (formerly Dementia Link Worker), Alzheimer Scotland Lanarkshire Information and Advice Centre; Maureen Thom, Information Manager, Alzheimer Scotland; Dr Iain McIntosh, GP; and Dorothy Sutherland, Carer.

Published by NHS Health Scotland

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Glasgow G2 2AF

© NHS Health Scotland, 2009, 2011, 2012

ISBN: 978-1-84485-420-2

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NHS Health Scotland is a WHO Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion and Public Health Development.

# Contents

What is 'normal' memory?	3
What should I do if I'm worried?	4
What can affect memory?	6
Mild cognitive impairment	9
What if it is dementia?	11
Helping your memory	12
What can I do to keep well?	14
Where to get help	17

**'Quite often when someone asks what I did at the weekend my mind goes blank and I haven't a clue. But I don't worry about it – I've always been like that.'**



memory

**tip**

If you mislay important things like your keys or your purse, choose one place to keep them – for example in a bowl on the kitchen table – and get into the routine of always keeping them there.

# What is 'normal' memory?

There is no such thing as a 'normal' memory. Everyone is different. One person might never forget a name, while someone else is hopeless at putting names to faces. Don't compare your memory with that of other people.

It is normal to get a bit more forgetful with age – children have the best memories, while the rest of us have to work harder to remember things, especially as we get older.

It is also normal to have little 'lapses' every so often. Most people occasionally forget what they went into a room for, or can't quite find the word that's on the tip of their tongue.

When this happens, we usually remember later on what it was we were looking for, or the word we were trying to say.

**'Sometimes I can't remember someone's name when I'm talking to them – but it usually comes to me later when I've stopped trying.'**

# What should I do if I'm worried?

Many of the things that cause memory problems can be treated. It is important to see your doctor if:

- your memory has changed significantly or rapidly from what is 'normal' for you
- your memory has been getting steadily worse over a period of time
- your memory is causing new problems in your life, such as difficulty managing money, or forgetting important appointments
- you are noticing other problems too, such as changes in your mood or behaviour, having difficulty following conversations, or trouble performing familiar tasks.

Perhaps you could talk to someone who knows you well to see if they have noticed any changes from what is normal for you. Other people may notice your memory problems before you do. If this happens, ask them about what they have noticed. This can be difficult, but it is best if you have a full picture of any changes that may have taken place.

If you are unsure about any of these things, it is a good idea to see the doctor anyway.

Before you visit the doctor, it can help if you make a note of what is worrying you. You could keep a diary of any problems you have, so that you can give the doctor a clear picture of what is going on.

Ask for a double appointment, to allow plenty of time to discuss your concerns. Take a notepad with you so that you can write down what the doctor says. If you want, take someone you trust along with you to the appointment to support you. He or she could also give the doctor another point of view about what you have been experiencing.

Your GP will probably take down a lot of detailed information about you. Because everyone's memory is different, the doctor will need help from you, and perhaps someone who knows you well, to work out if anything has changed.

Your GP may refer you to a memory clinic or a hospital specialist to better understand what has been happening. This may include more detailed testing of your memory, and sometimes other tests.

**'I'm 55. Recently my memory has been dreadful. The last straw was when my sister came for the weekend and I forgot all about it – I got home to find she'd been on the doorstep for two hours. I was afraid to go to the doctor, but my husband finally persuaded me. My GP did some tests and told me that it's probably because of the menopause. I've been taking hormone replacement therapy for a while now, and I feel much better.'**

# What can affect memory?

All kinds of things can affect memory or make people feel confused. Many of these things, although distressing at the time, can be cured or treated. For example, chest or urinary infections, depression and the side effects of some medication can all make some people confused. Memory problems caused by things such as the emotional distress of bereavement will get better on their own, in time.

**‘When I was going through my divorce last year, I felt as if my mind was going. I kept forgetting things all the time. Eventually I went to my doctor, and she said that stress and anxiety affect concentration, and this causes memory problems. I didn’t get better right away, but I started relaxation classes, and now my memory is back to normal.’**

Some of the things that can affect memory are:

- stress or anxiety (worrying about your memory can make it worse!)
- having too many things on your mind
- illness and infection
- unhappiness and depression
- bereavement
- lack of sleep
- noise or other distractions
- vitamin deficiency or a thyroid disorder
- the side effects of sleeping pills, sedatives or other drugs
- overuse of alcohol
- the menopause
- conditions such as mild cognitive impairment, a stroke or dementia.

**'I had a chest infection last year and it made me very confused. To be honest I don't remember a lot about it, but my daughter says I was forgetting what day it was, not taking my antibiotics and forgetting to eat. She was really worried about me, but once the infection cleared up I was okay again. My doctor said it's quite common for infections to do that to older people.'**



memory

tip

If you are taking medication, ask your chemist about pill boxes with different compartments, to help you remember to take your pills.

# Mild cognitive impairment?

After doing some tests, a specialist doctor may decide that you have 'mild cognitive impairment', which is usually called MCI for short. MCI generally affects older people, and means that although you can still function perfectly well, you have more difficulty with mental abilities than would be expected as you get older.

If you have MCI, you will probably feel that your memory isn't quite what it used to be. Some people find that other mental processes are also affected. For example, you may have difficulty with concentration, or have trouble finding the right word.

MCI is not the same as dementia. The symptoms may seem similar, but MCI is much milder. Some people with MCI do develop dementia, but others do not.

MCI doesn't mean you have to stop getting on with your life. Use the tips in this booklet to help your memory. If you would like more information about MCI, call the free 24 hour **Dementia Helpline** on **0808 808 3000**.

**'I was starting to get so frustrated with myself. I'd joke about it, but underneath I was worried about getting forgetful. When I finally went to see my doctor she sent me to see a specialist, who diagnosed MCI and gave me advice on how to manage my memory problems. Now at least I know what I'm dealing with.'**



memory

tip

Keep a list of important things to do before you go to bed at night – like making sure the cooker is turned off, the fridge door is shut, and the front door is locked.

# What if it is dementia?

Dementia is an illness that affects the brain. Only a doctor can diagnose you with dementia. Although progressive, it is gradual – if you have a diagnosis of dementia, it does not mean you will suddenly become very ill or dependent on others.

The good news is that there is a great deal of research being conducted into the causes and treatment of the different kinds of dementia, for example, Alzheimer's disease. Treatment is currently available which may help some people with Alzheimer's disease, and new treatments are being investigated all the time.

If you have dementia, don't try to handle it on your own. It is normal to have strong emotional reactions after you are diagnosed. Talk to someone about how you feel. Give yourself time to come to terms with your diagnosis. You can still carry on enjoying life when you have dementia.

**'My tip is to be positive, and challenge yourself. That's what I do. And speak to other people with dementia... join a group like I did.'**

People with dementia, and their families and friends, report that there are many ways to make life easier when living with dementia. For further information and advice, call the free 24 hour Dementia Helpline on **0808 808 3000**. You may also find the booklet **Facing Dementia: how to live well with your diagnosis** and accompanying DVD **Living well with dementia** helpful. Both are aimed at those who have recently been given a diagnosis of dementia and are available from the Dementia Helpline or from your local GP practice.

# Helping your memory

There are many practical ways to help yourself if – for whatever reason – you are having difficulty with your memory.

Different things will help different people. Think about the main things that frustrate you, and then work out ways around them. Establish routines for yourself so that you don't have to rely on your memory all the time. Here are a few examples:

- Make lists, or keep notes in a diary, of the things you've done and the things you have to do. Keep these lists where you can easily see or find them. For example, pin the list to a noticeboard, or keep the diary in your pocket or bag. Try to always write things down on the same list, in the same place. Get into the habit of checking your list or regularly.
- If you're comfortable with mobile phones, let the technology work for you. Find out how to set the alarm so that your phone can beep to remind you about the things you need to do. It's even better than a diary because you don't have to remember to look at it!
- If you mislay important things like your keys or your purse, choose one place to keep them – for example in a bowl on the kitchen table – and get into the routine of always keeping them there.
- If you are taking medication, ask your chemist about pill boxes with different compartments, to help you remember to take your pills.

- When you meet someone new, help yourself remember his or her name by using it several times in the conversation. But if you forget, just ask!
- Don't worry about remembering to pay regular bills. If you set up standing orders or direct debits, your bank will pay them automatically for you.
- Keep a list of important things to do before you go to bed at night – like making sure the cooker is turned off, the fridge door is shut, and the front door is locked.
- Ask your family or friends to help. For example, someone could phone to help you remember an appointment, make sure you pay a bill, or help you with your diary or reminder lists.

**'I have a whiteboard in my kitchen – I use it for my shopping list, and every morning my husband reminds me of things I'm doing that day and I write them on the board.'**

Some people feel embarrassed about having a memory problem, or lose confidence in themselves. But often it is easier if you are open about it. If you're having difficulties, try telling people that your memory isn't very good and asking for help. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

**'So many times I've had difficult conversations with people when they obviously know who I am but I haven't a clue who they are. Now I'm upfront about it – I just say my memory isn't what it was, and ask them to remind me who they are.'**

If you want help with managing your memory problems, a psychologist, community psychiatric nurse (CPN) or occupational therapist can help. Your doctor can refer you to someone in your area who can help.

# What can I do to keep well?

Some kinds of memory problems, such as dementia, will gradually get worse. Some, such as memory difficulties after a stroke, may improve. But it always helps to keep as well as possible.

Because there are so many different things that can affect your brain, there are also lots of things you can do to help keep it in shape. Some may not help your memory directly, but might help you enjoy life more.

- Keep up your normal activities as much as you can. Ask for help if you need it.
- Stay involved with your family, friends and community, and enjoy an active social life.
- Be aware of situations that may be difficult or stressful for you. Plan ahead and don't be afraid to ask for help if you feel uncertain or worried.
- Check your medication – ask your doctor if you need all the medication you are currently taking, and return what you don't need to a pharmacist.
- Ask your doctor to check your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- Eat a balanced and healthy diet – ask your doctor or practice nurse for advice.

- Do some regular physical activity, such as walking – aim for at least half an hour most days.
- Don't smoke. Even if you have smoked for years, you will benefit from stopping.
- Don't drink to excess or take illegal drugs – these can make you confused.
- Keep your mind active – continue with the things you enjoy, or take up a new interest.
- Reduce stress, or if you can't avoid it, ask your doctor or CPN about stress management – simple relaxation exercises can help a lot.
- Make sure you get enough sleep.

**'I don't know if it's helped my memory, but getting out and about for a walk every day has made a world of difference to how I feel, and I'm even sleeping better now.'**



memory

tip

If you're comfortable with mobile phones, let the technology work for you. Find out how to set the alarm so that your phone can beep to remind you about things you need to do.

# Where to get help

## Dementia Helpline

Freephone: **0808 808 3000**  
(24 hours)

Email: **helpline@alzscot.org**

Website: **www.alzscot.org**



To talk to someone, in confidence, about any concerns you have with your memory or someone else's, call Alzheimer Scotland's Dementia Helpline. It is open 24 hours a day for information, emotional support and a listening ear.

## Breathing Space

Freephone: **0800 83 85 87**

Textphone: **0800 31 71 60**

(Mon-Thurs: 6 pm to 2 am; Fri 6 pm to Mon 6 am)

Website: **www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk**

Anyone can feel down or depressed from time to time. Breathing Space is a free, confidential service. They provide a safe and supportive space in times of difficulty by listening, and offering advice and information.

## Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland

Phone: **0845 077 6000**

Textphone: **0845 077 6000**

(Mon-Fri: 9.30 am to 4 pm)

Email: **[adviceline@chss.org.uk](mailto:adviceline@chss.org.uk)**

Website: **[www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)**

CHSS's Advice Line is staffed by specialist nurses and provides confidential advice on all aspects of chest, heart and stroke illness. They have booklets and factsheets available, including information on memory problems after a stroke.

CHSS's specialist nurses can also be contacted by texting 'chss', followed by your message to **07766 404 142**.

## Action on Depression

Phone: **0808 802 2020**

(Mon-Thurs: 11 am to 1 pm and 2 pm to 4 pm)

Email: **[info@actionondepression.org](mailto:info@actionondepression.org)**

Website: **[www.actionondepression.org](http://www.actionondepression.org)**

Action on Depression's Helpline offers information and support to individuals, their families and friends, and professionals working with people who have depression.

## Mental Health Foundation in Scotland

Website: **[www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/Scotland](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/Scotland)**

Visit the website for a wide range of useful information relating to mental health. The Mental Health Foundation does not run a helpline and is not able to offer advice on individual mental health problems.

## The Stroke Association

Phone: **0303 303 3100**

Textphone: **020 7251 9096**

(Mon-Fri: 9 am to 5 pm)

Email: **[scotland@stroke.org.uk](mailto:scotland@stroke.org.uk)**

Website: **[www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)**

Call or email for information, practical advice or someone to talk to about stroke, and how to cope with life after a stroke.

## Carers UK

Carers UK Advice Line: **0808 808 7777**

(Wed, Thurs: 10 am to 12 pm and 2 pm to 4 pm)

Carers Scotland: **0141 445 3070**

(Mon-Fri: 9 am to 5 pm)

Website: **[www.carersuk.org/Scotland](http://www.carersuk.org/Scotland)**

Visit the website for a wide range of useful information for carers, or call for information and advice.

## NHS 24

Freephone: **08454 24 24 24** (24 hours)

Website: **[www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com)**

When your GP practice is closed and you feel you can't wait until it opens, call the NHS 24 on **08454 24 24 24**.

For up-to-date reliable information about illnesses and conditions, NHS services and current health issues, call **0800 22 44 88** or visit the NHS inform website at **[www.nhsinform.co.uk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk)**

# Notes



Many people worry about their memory. Sometimes people are afraid that forgetfulness is the start of something else, like dementia. This can worry older people especially.

People who have had a relative with dementia may also be particularly anxious about memory problems. Most cases of dementia, however, are not hereditary. If this worries you, talk to your doctor. Don't keep your concerns to yourself.

Most of us have times when we cannot remember something we ought to know. This is likely to happen to everyone now and then, in different ways.

Your memory may be nothing to worry about, but this booklet will help you decide if you should visit your doctor.