

# Seasons of Faith and Hope

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## MEMORY LOSS IN OLDER ADULTS

Memory loss is a common concern among older adults. It affects an estimated 15-20 percent of individuals over the age of 65. As people get older, changes occur in all parts of the body, including the brain, so some degree of memory decline is considered normal with aging.

Signs of mild forgetfulness include noticing that it takes longer to learn new things, not remembering information as well as in the past, or losing things. Some adults also find that they don't do as well as younger people on complex memory or learning tests. Scientists have found that if older adults are given enough time, healthy older people can do as well as younger people do on these tests.

### Some Causes of Memory Loss

**Age-related changes:** As we age, our brains undergo structural changes that can affect memory function.

**Thyroid problems:** An underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) can contribute to memory problems.

**Nutritional Deficiencies:** Deficiencies in vitamins B12 and folate can impair memory function.

**Medications:** Side effects from certain medications, such as sedatives, antidepressants, and anticholinergics can cause memory loss.

**Vascular Dementia:** Caused by damage to blood vessels in the brain can lead to memory loss and other cognitive problems.

**Mild Cognitive Impairment:** This is a transitional state between normal aging and dementia, characterized by mild memory and cognitive problems.

**Dementia:** It is a group of brain disorders that cause severe and progressive memory loss, along with other cognitive and behavioral changes; Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. Dementia is characterized by the loss of thinking, memory, and reasoning skills to such an extent that it seriously affects a person's ability to carry out daily activities. Symptoms may include:

- Being unable to remember recent events or conversations
- Asking the same question or telling the same story repeatedly
- Misplacing items frequently
- Difficulty with planning and organizing
- Becoming lost in familiar places
- Being unable to follow directions
- Getting disoriented about time, people, and places
- Neglecting personal safety, hygiene, and nutrition

People who are worried about memory problems should see a doctor, who may conduct a thorough physical and mental health evaluation, including medical history, medication review, blood and urine tests, imaging studies (MRI or CAT scan), tests for memory loss and the person's problem-solving and language abilities. A neurologist often conducts the evaluation and may ask family members and friends who know the person well to share their observations that may assist in making a diagnosis. Once the cause is identified, an appropriate course of treatment can be determined and must include the emotional and spiritual support of compassionate caregivers.

### **Keep Your Memory Sharp**

Here are some tips that can help people with some forgetfulness stay healthy and maintain their memory and mental skills:

- Plan tasks, make a "to do" list, and use memory aids like notes and calendars. Some find they remember things better if they mentally connect them to other meaningful things, such as a familiar name, song, book or TV show.
- Develop interests or hobbies and stay involved in activities that can help both the mind and body. Word search, cards, puzzles etc. can help.
- Engage in physical activity and exercise. Exercise (such as walking) has been associated with better brain function although more research is needed to say for sure whether exercise can help maintain brain function or prevent or delay symptoms of Alzheimer's.
- Limit alcohol use. Long-standing heavy drinking can cause memory loss and permanent brain damage.
- Find activities such as exercise or a hobby to relieve feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression. If these feelings last for a long time, talk to your doctor.

Sources: National Institute on Aging; Alzheimer's Association

