

ASK Silver Doc:

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Dear Silver Doc,

I just turned 65 and don't seem to be as sharp as I used to be. For example, I had always prided myself on being good with names. Now it seems that whenever I run into someone I know, I come up with their name only after they've walked away. Does this sound like Alzheimer's disease?

Forgetful

Dear Forgetful,

You are expressing a very common concern. What you are describing, however, sounds more like normal aging than it does like Alzheimer's disease. Just as we experience changes in our bodies with age, so, too, are there normal age-associated changes in memory. For a simple analogy, think of your brain as a big filing cabinet. As a child or teenager, your file drawers were virtually empty, but by the time you reach 65, those drawers are jam-packed with file folders stuffed with all kinds of experiences and knowledge you have accumulated over the years. When asked to pick out a specific piece of data, like the name of a former work colleague in the grocery store, you have 65 years worth of files to sort through. No wonder it takes time for the correct name to pop into your mind! With fewer file folders, as when you were 16, your retrieval process was much quicker. In fact, what you are talking about here is not really memory, but recall.

Another way of looking at the ways in which memory changes with age is to think of different mental functions related to memory such as attention, immediate recall (often called primary memory), delayed recall (often called secondary memory), visual-spatial ability, language, and reasoning. Components that are *most* affected by age are recall, episodic memory (typified by thinking of what you ate for breakfast), processing of new information, tests requiring focused attention, and timed memory tests. Changes in these are common and they generally fall within the realm of normalcy. Those aspects of thinking and memory that are *least* affected by age are language and vocabulary, recall of events in your personal past, visual-spatial ability, abstract reasoning, and problem solving. Changes in these latter areas *may* be cause for concern and should signal consideration of a professional evaluation.

As frustrating as these lapses are to you, they do not sound unusual. Also, keep in mind that normal aging changes tend to be accentuated by stress, fatigue and information overload. To preserve mental functions, your best bet is to keep your mind active. Play a game of Scrabble, work a crossword puzzle or read rather than watch TV. Also, as much as possible, maintain a healthful life style and take good care of yourself.

Thank you for your very important question.

Silver Doc

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“Silver Doc” is Dr. Michele Haber, a Board Certified Internal Medicine and Geriatric Medicine specialist. Dr. Haber specializes in evaluations in the home or facility focusing on Alzheimers’ disease and other dementias, early memory changes, behavioral problems, functional decline and frailty, polypharmacy and other geriatric medical issues. Send questions for “Silver Doc” to: mahaber@att.net