

It's time to talk about brain health.

Have you been noticing changes in an adult in your life? Perhaps the individual is having a hard time remembering things. He or she may act differently or struggle with everyday activities.

Talking about brain health does not have to be scary. This guide can help you start a conversation about those changes. Use it to talk with family, close friends and healthcare professionals.

It is normal for our brains to change as we get older.

As we age, our brains grow older, too. Some changes can be the result of normal aging.

Some examples of normal changes are:

- Small changes in daily activities, such as less driving.
- Some difficulty making decisions and understanding instructions.
- Occasional forgetfulness.
- Forgetting events and people from a long time ago.

What if the changes are not normal?

You may notice changes beyond those listed above. Use this guide to create a plan and help the person you care for get the support they need using the resources listed in this tool kit.



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Did you know?

There are a number of reasons why an older person may be having memory problems. These include medications, vitamin deficiencies, thyroid problems, and depression. Alzheimer's disease and other dementias also cause memory problems in older adults. It's important to remember that not all changes in memory mean that a person may have Alzheimer's or a related dementia.



BRAIN HEALTH BASICS

Staying healthy as we get older can improve our day-to-day life. Like our bodies, it is important to keep our brains in good shape. Your brain health depends on a couple of factors — your genetic makeup, your environment, and your health decisions.

As the National Institutes for Health and other experts explain, diseases and conditions that affect brain health include:

- Certain medicines, smoking, and excessive alcohol
- Health problems like diabetes and heart disease
- Diseases like depression and Alzheimer's
- Brain injury
- Poor diet, insufficient sleep, lack of physical and social activity

The good news is that there are healthy choices you can make as a family to improve brain health. These include:

- Eating a healthy diet. "You are what you eat" may sound cliché, but keep in mind that many of the things we do for heart health are also good for the brain. Choose colorful dark-skinned fruits and vegetables, whole grains, Omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, sardines), and anti-oxidants (blueberries, walnuts). Monitor intake of red meats, fried and processed foods, saturated fats and trans-fatty acids, salt, and added sugar. Consult a healthcare professional for additional dietary recommendations.
- **Challenge your brain.** Take the time to participate in tasks that challenge your brain, like playing an instrument, doing word or number puzzles, or learning a new language.
- **Find ways to keep your loved one socially active.** Invite the person you care for to events with their family and friends.
- Exercise together. There are lots of great exercises that can be done together, such as walking, swimming, dancing, or other group exercise programs. Before beginning any exercise regimen, be sure to check with the individual's doctor.
- Help the person you care for get a good night's sleep. The National Institute on Aging has information on how to improve your sleep health at www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/good-nights-sleep.

For more information on brain health as you age, visit https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/brain-health-resource



STEP 1: IS IT TIME TO TALK?

Have you noticed any of the following changes in the older adult in your life? Use this chart to take notes on changes you or others may have noticed. These notes can help you talk with healthcare professionals, such as a doctor or nurse.

CONVERSATION NOTES	TYPE OF CHANGE		
	Has trouble finding words in conversation, stops mid-thought		
	Has trouble remembering new or recent events		
	Relies on "memory helpers," such as reminder notes or computer programs more than usual		
	Confuses time, place or people, such as mistaking a close family member for a different family member		
	Often repeats phrases or questions within the same conversation		
	Struggles to complete familiar activities, such as paying bills or cooking a favorite recipe		
	Demonstrates new or sudden personality changes, such as: depression or irritability, loss of interest in important duties, avoiding social activities		
	Makes decisions that are out-of-character or that demonstrate poor judgment		
	Has new or unexpected difficulty with numbers, reading, distinguishing between colors, or judging distance (such as when driving)		



STEP 2: START THE CONVERSATION

The next step is to talk with the person you care for and the other friends and family who may help support this person.

CONVERSATION NOTES					

- First and foremost, educate yourself prior to the conversation.
 We have included some resources that may be helpful on page 8 of this guide. You may want to talk with other family or friends about your concerns and gather information.
- It's not easy to tell a friend or family member "I'm concerned about your memory." Here are some tips that may help:
 - Be considerate with the language used. For example, it is beneficial and supportive to say things like, "I'm worried about you."
 - Be mindful of how you describe the changes in memory. For example, instead of using "trigger words" like Alzheimer's or dementia, be clear that you want to talk with this person about their overall brain health. You may suggest accompanying the individual to a wellness check-up that includes memory screening, which is a simple, routine test, like a blood pressure or diabetes screening or skin check.
 - Be mindful of your tone and body language and try to remain calm. Know the individual's preferences and communication style.
 - Recognize that this conversation may need to happen more than once. Try to continue the dialogue but be considerate. Conversations about memory loss and brain health can be overwhelming to both parties.
 - Pair a doctor's visit with an enjoyable activity, such as going out to lunch or something else the individual enjoys.
 - Be open to changing your strategy and know what resources are available. The Alzheimer's Foundation of America's national, toll-free helpline is staffed by licensed social workers who can offer support and guidance during this time and thereafter. You can reach them at 866-232-8484.



STEP 3: TALK WITH THE HEALTHCARE TEAM

This chart will help you identify the next steps. Don't be afraid to ask for help from other friends and family members. It's best that you are not doing everything alone.

HEALTH CARE ACTION STEPS

FRIEND OR FAMILY WHO WILL HELP

GO WITH THE OLDER ADULT TO A MEDICAL APPOINTMENT AND SHARE YOUR CONCERNS.

Bring your conversation notes, including changes that you've noticed.

Questions for the healthcare provider:

- Ask if the changes that you and others have noticed are normal, and if not, what might be causing these changes.
- Ask about whether a "cognitive assessment" might be appropriate. This is a test to determine if the older person has changes in memory or brain function.
- If the person you are caring for is a Medicare beneficiary, ask the doctor about the Medicare Annual Wellness Exam, which is free for Medicare beneficiaries and includes a cognitive assessment.

Learn more at:

https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/preventive-visit-and-yearly-wellness-exams.html

YOU MAY WANT TO GET A FREE, CONFIDENTIAL MEMORY SCREENING BEFORE GOING TO MEDICAL APPOINTMENT.

A memory screening is a simple, non-invasive test that takes less than 10 minutes. A qualified health professional conducts the screening.

These screenings are designed to measure memory, thinking, and language skills. A screening is not a diagnosis of any kind, but scoring below the normal threshold can suggest that someone should follow up with a physician for a thorough evaluation. After the screening, the older adult will receive a letter that can be shared with the healthcare team, including a doctor.

FIND A SCREENING NEAR YOU AT www.afascreenings.org/search-us OR BY CALLING 866-232-8484.



STEP 4: DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Working with the person you care for and your friends and family, use this chart to identify next steps.

FAMILY ACTION STEPS	FRIEND OR FAMILY WHO WILL HELP
LEARN ABOUT ABOUT BRAIN HEALTH AND HOW BRAINS CHANGE AS WE AGE. Use the resources suggested in this guidebook, which are gathered from trustworthy sources including the National Institute on Aging, the Cleveland Clinic, and Mayo Clinic, among others. Learn more on page 8.	
FIND LOCAL RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP YOUR LOVED ONE STAY SAFE AND HEALTHY AS THEY GROW OLDER.	
 The Eldercare Locator is a public service that will help you find information on senior services near you. Learn more by calling 800-677-1116 or visiting www.eldercare.gov. 	
 Reach out to the Alzheimer's Foundation of America's national toll-free helpline, which is staffed by licensed social workers, at 866-232-8484. The helpline can provide caregiving tips and strategies, as well as referrals to local resources. 	
CONTINUE TO NOTICE CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR, TAKE NOTES, AND PLAN TO DISCUSS AGAIN AS A FAMILY.	
We will discuss again on [date, time]	
at [location].	



FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

Carolyn*

We were driving in our truck with the camper attached to the back. I just didn't realize how bad it was. I asked my husband if he was able to just drive in a straight line down the highway, so I could get a break. We got to a four way stop with a flashing red signal and he didn't stop. There we were, with our truck towing along a trailer in the back. Luckily, the car to the left of us stopped. I told my husband, 'We could have been seriously injured or killed!'

Our children were concerned and started noticing signs too. They'd say 'What's going on with dad?' Our young grandchild was even seeing signs too. They would see how frustrated my husband would

get because he couldn't track the conversation. My husband would often say 'I don't understand you.' There were a lot of breakdowns in communication.

I knew my husband had issues for a while. We finally went to the neurologist and they did a bunch of tests. They determined he had frontotemporal dementia. He also has Parkinsonian-type symptoms, which means difficulty walking and balancing. I couldn't say I was surprised with this diagnosis. Luckily we have two wonderful kids. We work together as a family to understand his diagnosis. When he's holding our youngest grandchild, we are on top of it! We all just understand there are some adjustments that need to be made.

Jessica*



I watched my grandmother live with Alzheimer's disease. I cried knowing she was losing the life she loved so much, at least her ability to live it as she once had. Now I see that in my dad.

I wanted to talk with him, create the space to listen, and let him know he's not alone, and doesn't need to hide anything.

I remember it clearly. I was home for a weekend, sitting with him in the bedroom. I told my dad that I wanted him to talk with a doctor I knew — that I wanted to know what is happening with him, and to see if there was anything that could be done. "Why go to a

doctor? What can they tell me? I don't want to end up like my mother and my uncle. I don't want to know."

Crying, I told him I need him to be around, that there are so many things he needs to be present for. "Do this for me. Who knows? Maybe it's something that can be resolved, maybe there is a trial. Please."

He said he'll do it for me. And he did. It's Alzheimer's disease. He is now in a clinical trial; he knows there is no cure, but for my siblings' and my sake, he wants to help, to make sure something is discovered so we don't have to live with his fear, of losing his memory of a life he loves.



RECOMMENDED READING

Brain Health

What is Brain Health?

http://www.brainhealth.gov

Mayo Clinic: Memory Loss-7 Tips to Improve Your Memory

http://bit.ly/MemoryHealth

Cleveland Clinic: Healthy Brains Initiative

https://healthybrains.org/healthy-brains-initiative

National Academies: Brain Health Action Guide for

Individuals and Families

http://bit.ly/AgingBrainActionGuide

Memory Changes – What's Normal?

WebMD: Is Your Memory Normal?

http://www.webmd.com/alzheimers/features/is-your-memory-normal

Mayo Clinic: Memory Loss - When to Seek Help

http://bit.ly/WhenToSeekHelp

Alzheimer's Foundation of America: Brain Health and Wellness

http://www.alzfdn.org/BrainHealth/successfulaging.html

Alzheimer's Foundation of America: Benefits of Early Detection of Memory Problems

http://www.alzfdn.org/BrainHealth/memoryscreenings.html

National Alliance for Caregiving: What Made You Think Mom Had Alzheimer's?

http://www.caregiving.org/data/NAC%20Alzheimers0411.pdf

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Many thanks go to our Advisory Committee of subject matter experts, listed at www.caregiving.org/talkbrainhealth