

# Confusion, memory problems common in elderly

**My dad is approaching 70 and seems to be getting more confused and forgetful. We don't think it's anything serious right now, but should we be worried about dementia?**

Occasional lapses of memory are nothing to worry about, whether you're age 40 or 80. But forgetfulness does become more common as we age. It takes longer for the brain to process new information, and it's harder to recall things we've known in the past.

In addition, distractions are more disruptive as we get older and can cause us to lose focus on what we're doing.

According to the National Institute on Aging, stress, anxiety or depression can cause more problems with confusion and forgetfulness. If your father is dealing with loneliness, boredom or other emotional problems, be as supportive as possible. If his confusion persists over a long period, seek help from a doctor or counselor.

Other health issues could also affect memory and brain function, including a deficiency of vitamin B12, chronic alcoholism or even (very rarely) a brain tumor. Some types of thyroid, kidney or liver disorders can also cause such problems. These are all serious medical conditions and need to be treated by a doctor. Some medications also can affect the memory.

Even more serious would be dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease or other problems. Anyone experiencing an abrupt loss of memory or a sudden bout of confusion



should see a doctor immediately: It could be a sign of vascular dementia caused by a series of strokes or other changes to the brain's blood supply. Alzheimer's disease is usually slower to develop.

Symptoms that should prompt a call to a doctor include:

- Asking the same question over and over.
  - Becoming lost in familiar places.
  - Not being able to follow directions.
  - Getting confused about time, people and places.
  - Not taking care of oneself — eating poorly, not bathing or being unsafe.
- Barring any serious medical problems, your father can take steps to help sharpen his ability to keep on track:
- Plan tasks, make "to do" lists, and use memory aids like notes and calendars.
  - Stay involved in activities that stimulate the mind, and keep physically active.
  - Eat a healthy diet, including almonds and walnuts; fruits and vegetables; fish and shellfish; and dark chocolate in small amounts.
  - Limit alcohol use, and if he smokes, stop.

More information is available from several reliable sources, including the American Medical Association and the National Institute on Aging. Also available is an online presentation from Oregon State University Outreach and Engagement. Links are available at <http://go.osu.edu/agingsites>.

*Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@osu.edu).*



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**For the month of  
October 2012**

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**Dear Subscriber:** This column was reviewed by James Bates, assistant professor and field specialist in family wellness with Ohio State University Extension.

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