Together
SENIOR HEALTH

Keeping Your Brain Healthy and Happy

A booklet to keep on hand for any questions about maintaining your brain health.

Together
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LINUS
HEALTH

Lots of different factors influence healthy aging, including your brain health. Learning about your brain can help you understand these connections and take care of yourself.



Sandra
Lifetime Learner

I have been living alone for years and I love my independence. I know that no one is going to take care of me so I'll just have to do that myself!



Michael
Reluctant Retiree

Although some of my peers have retired, I am staying in the workforce. I am slowing down a bit though and worry that others might think I am getting old.



Maria
Devoted Daughter

My mom lives alone and I'm not ready to step in, but I'm scared to think about what might happen over the next few years.

There is no "right" way to think about aging; follow along for a few different perspectives.

At least 1 in 3 cases of dementia may be preventable. Understanding the changes related to aging is the best way to know if something is wrong. This booklet has answers to important questions, such as...

What is the difference between typical age-related memory loss and something I should be concerned about?

> Losing your keys from time to time happens to everyone, but there are some red flags that you should be on the lookout for.

What can I do to keep my brain as strong and healthy as possible?

> Good news, there are lots of things you can do today to reduce your risk of cognitive decline and stay healthy!

Should I talk to my doctor if I have some concerns?

> Yes, your physician has the latest information about brain research and your overall health. Being prepared will help you get the most out of a doctor visit.

How will my doctor and I know if something is really wrong?

> Initial screening can be quick and easy but diagnosing an underlying cause might take several types of tests and must be done by your healthcare provider.

How would things change if I got a diagnosis of some type of cognitive decline?

> Changes in cognition rarely happen overnight. Early identification can help you and your loved ones to prepare for the best outcomes.

GOOD TIP

> Use the last pages of this booklet to keep notes for yourself and questions for doctor.

Should I be concerned about my memory?



Sandra

I have always tried to do what I can to stay healthy and active, but I recently got lost on the way to the market, and it scared me!

I have noticed more news about memory issues and new treatments, so I'm looking for the latest information.

I have to get ahead of this, I'm the only one who is going to take care of myself!



Michael

I have not really thought much about getting older but all of a sudden, here I am. I am worried that I'm having a hard time keeping up at work and my wife is reminding me of more things these days.

Am I really becoming more forgetful? Is this normal? I don't think anyone else knows. Maybe it will get better on its own if I ignore it.



Maria

My mom told me the same story about her cat a dozen times now, and when I was visiting recently I noticed that she had left the water running in the sink. Do all these little things mean something bigger is wrong, or is she just getting older?

I'm not sure if I need to step in, or how to do it. She has always been so independent. What if I wait too long and something dangerous happens?

Some changes are common as people get older. In typical aging, there is a gradual decrease in pace of movement and thinking. Only minor adjustments are needed to stay independent.

Early signs of mild cognitive impairment or dementia include more noticeable changes like language, memory, and way-finding. Complex tasks might start to get in the way of managing daily life.

Typical Age-Related Changes	Potential Signs of Cognitive Decline
Forgetting a name or date but remembering it later	Unable to recall the names of close friends or trouble naming familiar objects
Taking extra time to find the right word for something	Challenges following or joining a conversation
Need to use a map or phone app to get places	Getting lost going to familiar places
Missing an occasional appointment or event	Withdrawing from hobbies and social activities
Taking longer to learn new tasks	Difficulty developing a plan or managing a budget
Occasionally misplacing items but finding them later	Finding your keys in the refrigerator or leaving the stove on
Becoming irritable when routine is disrupted	Extreme mood or personality changes, anxiety or fear

GOOD TIP

If more items on the right than on the left sound like you or a loved one, you are showing signs of potential cognitive decline. It's time to **take action** - take care of your brain and see your doctor.

What can I do to keep my brain as healthy as possible?



Sandra

I play word games and do puzzles, but I'm always curious what else I could be doing. There is so much information on the internet and some of it is conflicting. How do I know which is right?

My worst fear is spending years alone in a nursing home. I want to do everything I can to stay healthy and keep learning as much as I can!



Michael

I know I should eat better and exercise more. Everyone should, right? But it's hard to change my routine and I'm pretty healthy now, aside from my cholesterol and depression. Do those things have anything to do with my memory?

There's probably not much I can do anyway and I really don't want anyone else to know that I might have memory issues, especially my boss.



Maria

How can I help my mom right now? I've searched online for ideas but there are a lot of people saying different things. I don't have time or energy to keep a close eye on her or take her to activities.

I'm worried about her taking a fall or having an accident but talking to her can be troubling. What else can I do that will help her stay healthy and independent?

Taking action now can reduce your risk of cognitive decline. Research has proven that daily habits have a big impact on long-term brain health, reducing your risk of decline and ensuring the best quality of life. You don't have to do them all, but making a few small changes can mean a lot!



Exercise to raise your heart rate.
Increase blood flow to your brain, with walking, dancing, or gardening.



Eat brain healthy foods.
Try more green leafy vegetables, berries, and leaner meats.



Quit smoking.
The health benefits include things like better blood flow to your brain.



Manage stress and your mood.
It can free up space in your brain for other things, like storing memories.



Manage health conditions.
Things like diabetes or high blood pressure can impact both your heart and brain.



Learn something new.
Challenge your mind and continue to build connections in your brain.



Deepen your sense of belonging.
Spend time with friends or loved ones and help others.



Protect your head.
Wear bike helmets and seatbelts. Also work on balance to reduce falls.



Create good sleep habits.
Down-time is essential for your brain to recover from the day.



Get your eyes and ears checked.
Unmanaged hearing and vision loss make it harder to manage everything else, including your brain health!

GOOD TIP

Research tells us that these brain healthy habits work even better together and it makes them easier to stick with. For example, weekly walks with a friend provide exercise, connection to others and challenges to your brain, and it may inspire you to get your vision or hearing checked!

Should I see my doctor?



Sandra

I have to advocate for myself. My doctor says I have more-pressing issues, so I'm worried she isn't taking my concerns about my memory seriously.

Is there a quick dementia test? I want to know as soon as possible so I know what I'm up against. I'm getting anxious and it's keeping me up at night!



Michael

I try to stay on top of my health but I have a new doctor and my new insurance is confusing. I'm not sure what to do. Could things get a lot worse if I just try to manage this myself?

If this is just normal, I'd better get used to it. If there's something wrong, will everything change?



Maria

I know my mom would benefit from talking to her doctor. I'd like to go with her but don't want to step on her toes, or make her feel like I'm taking over for her.

How do I get her to the doctor? How do we know what to expect? What can I tell her ahead of time?

It can be scary to find out if something is wrong, but the earlier you know, the more you can do about it. There are some good reasons to see your doctor.

You may find out that your symptoms are related to something other than dementia.

> Circumstances such as medication side effects, hearing loss, mental health concerns, or sleep problems can look like or impact memory **but may be treatable.**

There is no single path forward.

> Different types of cognitive impairment have different trajectories and outcomes, and **may not always progress to Alzheimer's Disease.**

The best chance of delay is early management.

> **It's never too late** to pay attention to your brain health and reduce the risk of further decline.

> Many of the new treatments and medications are most helpful in the earliest stages of memory loss.

Make plans now to age the way you want and maximize your quality of life.

> Understanding what to expect **allows you to make choices** now for yourself and your loved ones about treatment, finances and community.

GOOD TIP

> Doctors can have different approaches to addressing memory concerns and specialists are often difficult to access. You may need to be proactive in getting your questions answered and the treatment that you want.

What is involved in memory screening and diagnosis?



Sandra

I've taken several online tests and they all say I should see my doctor if I am concerned. My doctor says I'm just getting older, but I really want to know if this is something I can fix or if it's more serious.

I feel like I am on my own in the medical system, so I want to know what to expect and ask for.



Michael

I wish I could just take a quick test at home and know right away, but I need my questions answered by someone I really trust.

I've read lots of things online, but I'm not sure who is right. Will I need to see a specialist? Is that expensive? It's good to have some back-up, so I'll see my doctor and bring my wife.



Maria

I have a lot of "what if?" worries. What if mom doesn't tell the doctor everything? What if we can't get in to see the right doctor? Testing seems like a long and complicated process that could agitate my mom. How do I handle that?

I want to be prepared so I can help her through this and make sure she is getting the care she needs.

There is no single test for determining brain health, so doctors use a combination of screening tools and diagnostic tests.

1 Discussion about your health and history can help rule out other issues and identify risk factors.

Some medication side effects or health issues such as depression or recent illness can **mimic symptoms of dementia.**

Conditions such as **hearing or vision loss** could result in behavior that looks like memory loss or impede testing.

2 A physical exam and digital or paper-based tests can assess changes in thinking or behavior.

Normal age-related memory loss may be true for you, and some lifestyle changes can help maintain your brain health.

You may be diagnosed with **mild cognitive decline (MCI).** Note that ⅓ of patients with MCI may develop Alzheimer's Disease, but that ⅓ stabilize and ⅓ improve over time.

Modest concerns may be identified. Your doctor may want to **"watch and wait"** to see if symptoms change over time.

Cognitive decline can be caused by one of several underlying conditions. You may be **referred to a specialist** for further testing.

3 Advanced testing can help identify what may be causing symptoms or eligibility for drug therapy.

Brain imaging can identify build-up of proteins that could correlate with specific brain-related conditions.

Genetic testing can identify genes that increase your risk of Alzheimer's or rule out some treatment options.

New research using **blood tests or lumbar puncture** could potentially identify biomarkers targeted by recently-developed drug therapy.

GOOD TIP

It may take several interactions to determine appropriate next steps, so be prepared to follow up with additional healthcare appointments.

What happens next?



Sandra

A diagnosis of cognitive decline right now would be scary. I have been living alone for years and I love my independence. I know that no one is going to take care of me though. It's good to know that I've got time to make some plans and to do everything I can to stay healthy.

I want to find the most accurate information available, find a support group, and try those new drugs if I am eligible.



Michael

I am worried that people will treat me differently if they know I have cognitive impairment. Our kids are nearby but I'd hate to think I'll ever be a burden on them, the way my aunt was when she got dementia.

I'm glad to know that there are ways I can stay independent without feeling too old just yet - make more lists, use maps and reminders, and make the gym and more healthy foods part of my daily routine.



Maria

What if my mom does have dementia...am I going to end up taking care of her full-time? Will she have to move? She wants to ignore this for as long as possible, but a fall or accident will change everything really fast.

It's best to know now what's most important to her and what our options really are. I need a good understanding of her financial and legal situation.

It's important to know that most memory changes take place over years, not days. The earlier you take charge of your brain health however, the better chance you have to make a difference in your life and that of your loved ones.

Practice Self Care



- Keep **doing the things you love,** even if it gets harder
- Develop **positive daily routines and habits** to minimize distractions and stress
- Make **use of helpful tools** like pill dispensers, maps, reminder apps, and post-its

Manage Your Health



- **Keep on top of conditions** that could worsen symptoms such as depression, sleep issues or heart disease
- **Ask your doctor** about medication interactions and side effect
- Get your **hearing and eyes checked** regularly

Be Safe at Home



- **Install safety items** before they are needed such as night lights and grab bars and remove clutter
- **Make plans** for transportation or safe driving
- **Use visual cues** such as labels, pictures and notes as needed

Plan for the Future



- Review your finances, insurance and assets with a **trusted advisor**
- Speak with loved ones about **advance directives and legal options**
- Proactively discuss and set up to manage your **long term care wishes and choices**

Stay Informed



- Ask your healthcare provider **about trustworthy resources**
- Check with your insurance provider about **coverage for drugs** or other treatment options
- Explore new ways to **enjoy the things that matter most** to you

Stay Connected



- Make the effort to **maintain relationships**
- **Share information with loved ones** about your condition
- Join a support **group, a class, or a volunteer opportunity**

GOOD TIP

Making plans can reduce worry. Honest conversations can be difficult but are the best way to make your preferences known for the future.

What can *you* do to take care of your brain?



Sandra

I'll do whatever I can now to set up for my best future.

I will have a serious conversation with my doctor and it's a good time to make sure my home is safe and that I've got all the right legal documents in place.

I'll also talk to my closest friends and suggest we do more activities together to keep our brains healthy.



Michael

I'm going to ask my doctor what I can do to fix or delay symptoms as long as possible. It's scary to think about, but if I don't manage this now I could be forced to retire or end up being a bigger burden on my family later.

I'll include my wife now as well, but want to get more information before sharing concerns with my family or making any specific plans.



Maria

It's time for a heart-to-heart talk with mom. I'll tell her what I am observing and how it helps me to go to her appointments together.

I need to understand what could be going on, what options are out there to help her and how to take care of myself through this.

I want to respect her wishes and dignity, but I know that pushing this off will only make it harder on both of us.

Use the list here to support your conversations with your doctor and loved ones - check any items you think are important or add your own notes.

Possible symptoms of concern:

- [ ] Generally more forgetful
- [ ] Forget names of close friends or familiar objects
- [ ] Trouble joining of following conversations
- [ ] Getting lost or disoriented
- [ ] Losing interest in my regular hobbies or social activities
- [ ] Other people taking on my household tasks and budget
- [ ] Becoming more fearful or anxious
- [ ] None of the above
- [ ] Anything else: _____

Ways to keep my brain healthy:

- [ ] Increase physical activity
- [ ] Eat healthier
- [ ] Reduce stress
- [ ] Improve my sleep routine
- [ ] Better manage other health conditions
- [ ] Connect more with friends
- [ ] Learn something new
- [ ] Something else

Questions for my healthcare provider:

- [ ] What else might be causing these symptoms?
- [ ] What different possible outcomes and timing might I expect?
- [ ] What can I do now to stay as healthy as possible?
- [ ] What treatment options exist for me?
- [ ] Where can I find more information and resources?
- [ ] Other: _____

My healthcare values and priorities to share with my healthcare provider:

- [ ] I am very private and don't want others to know about my health
- [ ] I have lots of support and can share information with friends and/or family
- [ ] I actively push for new treatments and any testing available
- [ ] I wait for my doctor to suggest the right options for me
- [ ] I like to make plans and know what is coming
- [ ] I face every day as it comes and don't mind surprises

Notes and questions for my doctor:

_____

_____

_____

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Better Together

Together Senior Health brings the best research about memory loss out of the lab and creates engaging, evidence-based programs to slow cognitive decline for people who want to stay healthy and independent as they age.

To a view an online version of the current booklet with live links to reference sources, scan the QRCode to the right.