

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected by Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia.

alzheimer's association®

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**800.272.3900**

[alz.org/CACentral](http://alz.org/CACentral)

## What to know when going to the neurologist

By Laura DeLoye, Program & Education Manager

When you learn a loved one has been diagnosed with dementia, short-term memory loss or mild cognitive impairment, you may feel afraid or confused. About 60% of people living with dementia are not being diagnosed early or are not informed about their diagnosis. It's often confusing as to what type of doctor to see for an evaluation of memory and cognitive problems.

Many people assume that if they have dementia it will be found during a regular checkup. This is not always the case - not all doctors screen for dementia and most people affected with mild cognitive loss become skilled at covering their symptoms (even at a doctor's visit). It's helpful to document the symptoms of the person thought to have dementia and share this information with the doctor during the visit.

If you are experiencing chronic memory loss symptoms you should be evaluated by a memory specialist—a neurologist, psychiatrist or an internist with extensive experience in memory evaluations.

How do physicians screen for cognitive impairment? When cognitive impairment is suspected, primary care physicians administer a short cognitive assessment test. There are several tests available, including the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA) [11], Mini-Cog[12], General Practitioner Assessment of Cognition (GPCOG)[13], and the Mini-Mental State Exam[14].

The Mini-Mental State Exam is quite common. It is a brief test not meant to diagnose underlying conditions but rather evaluate whether overall mental functioning is within

normal ranges. Doctors may take the patient's level of education and other factors into consideration when interpreting the results of a mini-mental. However, as a general rule, a test score lower than 24 (30 being optimal) means the patient should auto-



matically be referred to a neurologist or brain specialist for a more thorough evaluation. Further investigation is necessary to determine the underlying problem.

Regardless of the score, it is important to keep in mind that the Mini-Mental is not designed to fully evaluate for cognitive changes. Patients exhibiting signs of cognitive decline often pass it with flying colors. Therefore, regardless of the results, the patient or the caregiver should still request a referral to a specialist. Demand a referral to a neurologist, the most qualified specialist to help you. Don't forget that dementia is a neurological condition and not a psychiatric one.

Although neurologists are the most appropriate specialists on matters of dementia, not every neurologist is skilled in dementia. Before making an appointment, make sure to verify that your selected neurologist is in fact an expert in dementia. When consulting with a skilled neurologist, the patient should expect a wide variety of tests including a

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brain scan and physical examination.

Act as soon as possible. An early, thorough diagnosis increases the chances of benefiting from treatment, more time to make choices that maximize quality of life and fewer anxieties about undefined problems.

Once you have consulted with a neurologist, there are a variety of diagnoses they may give. Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is one. This means that cognitive symptoms have been identified but they are not severe enough to interfere with regular activities and no other abnormalities have been found. An MCI diagnosis does not imply the existence of a disease, just that the patient's brain is functioning at a suboptimal level. Dementia is diagnosed when cognitive losses are severe enough to interfere with day-to-day life. Functionality is the criteria that differentiate dementia from MCI.

Once a diagnosis of dementia is confirmed, ask the important question:

*What is causing the dementia?*

Sometimes, despite expert training and the best intentions of the neurologist, the cause of the dementia cannot be confirmed. Seek expert consultation to determine the best course of action regardless of the diagnosis. If the cause of dementia is not known, schedule a follow-up visit soon so the patient can be monitored, particularly if medication has been prescribed. Talk to your doctor about what to do next and what to expect as the disease progresses. Prepare for the future today the best you can by seeing a neurologist and then planning accordingly. Do not fear the

answer. Fear not having an answer.

Pursuing an early and accurate diagnosis allows for the person with dementia to be involved. Once a diagnosis of dementia is made, there are legal, safety and long-term plans that should be made. Early diagnosis allows the person with dementia to be involved in the decision regarding their own future.

When visiting a neurologist, be prepared.

The doctor will ask questions about:

- What kinds of symptoms have been occurring?
- When the symptoms began?
- How often they happen?
- Have the symptoms have gotten worse?
- Be prepared with a list of medications, including vitamins, herbal supplements and past medications.

What questions to ask the neurologist:

- What tests will be conducted?
- How long will it take to get an official diagnosis?
- What should be expected if the diagnosis is Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia?
- What are the available treatments?

Remember—dementia is not a normal part of aging. Typical age-related changes would include sometimes forgetting a name or appointment, but remembering them later. A person with dementia would not remember these answers later.

Reach out to the Alzheimer's Association at any local office, call our 24 hour/day Helpline at: 1-800-272-3900 or check out the 10 Warning Signs at [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)



## TIPS

Start journaling all symptoms you observe, including unusual behaviors, time of the day they happen, and any potentially stressful circumstances that occurred at the time. Tracking information accurately will help in communicating with doctors and other medical professionals.

Take notes during doctor's appointments.

Always have someone accompany the person with memory loss to doctors appointments.

Contact the Alzheimer's Association, regardless of the kind of dementia you are faced with, and ask for an appointment with a care specialist who can help you understand the diagnosis and give you references for local services and providers.

## TOOLS



Call the Alzheimer's Association at **800.272.3900** and ask for a listing of qualified dementia specialists.

Sign up for a free Support Group where you can start building a support system with people who understand. You can find a current listing of all our Support Groups at [alz.org/CACentral](http://alz.org/CACentral)

Find more tips and tools at [alz.org](http://alz.org)

# ARE YOU READY TO WALK?

October 2nd in Santa Maria

October 23rd in East Ventura

October 30th in San Luis Obispo

November 6th in Santa Barbara



We're walking in 2021 and we're inviting you to join us. Sign up now at

[alz.org/Walk](http://alz.org/Walk)