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## Primary Care/Neurologist—Who, What, When?

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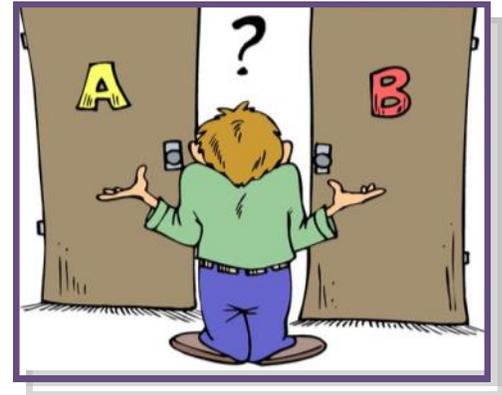
Forgetfulness is a common issue that affects everyone; but when it becomes consistent and begins to interfere with the ability to function, it may be dementia and you should get checked out. Dementia is not a specific disease, but a range of symptoms associated with memory or cognitive problems severe enough to affect a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

About 60 percent of people living with dementia are not being diagnosed early or are not informed about their diagnosis. It is often confusing as to what type of doctor to see for an evaluation of one's memory and cognitive problems.

Consulting a doctor at an early stage is critical to allow for treatment and planning. If you have dementia, it is important to find out what type it is because treatments can vary according to the symptoms. The four most common types of dementia are:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia
- Dementia with Lewy bodies
- Frontotemporal dementia

If you are experiencing chronic memory loss symptoms you should be evaluated by a memory specialist. This could be a psychiatrist, a neurologist, or an internist, but, in any case, it should be a doctor who has a strong interest and extensive experience in memory evaluations. Standard memory tests may need to be performed. In addition, your ability for delayed recall of information may need to be tested. Delayed recall of information that had just recently been presented is one



of the earliest signs of mild cognitive impairment (MCI).

Your primary care physician is often the best place to start; if more focused testing or treatment is needed, you may be referred to a specialist. However, although it could help clarify a diagnosis or supplement primary treatment, primary care physicians don't necessarily refer a patient to a specialists. In such a case, it is up to you to sort through the maze of medical professionals.

A **primary care physician** is sometimes referred to as a "generalist. Trained in general internal medicine or family medicine, primary care physicians focus on diagnosing and treating common medical conditions. Many primary care physicians are capable of performing an initial assessment and full evaluation, and prefer to oversee the diagnostic process themselves. When talking to your primary care physician about your memory and cognitive concerns, ask how familiar he or she is with diagnosing dementia and whether there are circumstances in which it would be best to refer you to a specialist who can fully evaluate your symptoms and diagnose dementia.



## Tips & Tools

The first step in following up on symptoms is finding a doctor you feel comfortable with.

### 10 Warning Signs:

1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks
4. Confusion with time or place
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
6. New problems with words in speaking or writing
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
8. Decreased or poor judgment
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities
10. Changes in mood and personality.

An early diagnosis of dementia provides a range of benefits for the individuals who are diagnosed, as well as for their loved ones.

If you are 65 or older, it is important that **you** request a cognitive assessment when you are at your **annual wellness visit**. Some people with unclear symptoms, including those under age 65, may require evaluation by two or more specialists who combine their findings to reach a diagnosis. A doctor may also refer patients to a specialist to confirm the diagnosis and determine the type of dementia.



**Geriatricians** are primary care physicians who have additional training in medical care for diseases and conditions common among older adults, generally over age 65. These physicians are typically prepared to manage multiple medical conditions.

**Geriatric Psychiatrists** are trained in general psychiatry with additional training in mental health and aging. They may be helpful in ruling out other causes of memory loss, such as depression, and in treating behavioral issues in people with dementia.

**Neurologists** are trained in nervous system disorders, including issues with the brain, spinal cord, and peripheral nerves. Neurologists typically receive formal training in Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, although not all neurologists will diagnose or treat people with the disease. Some neurologists focus on other conditions, such as pain management, Parkinson's disease, and seizure disorders. If you are referred to a neurologist, confirm that they treat patients living with Alzheimer's or other dementias.

**Neuropsychologists** administer a variety of tests to assess thinking abilities, including memory, attention, language, reading, and problem-solving skills.

Neuropsychologists work closely with other specialists and primary care physicians during the diagnostic process. Most practicing clinical neuropsychologists have an advanced degree (Ph.D. or Psy.D.) in clinical psychology and additional training in neuropsychology.

Whichever medical professional you choose to consult, effective communication with your doctor is important when you are seeking a diagnosis for memory loss. At your visit, be prepared to answer questions and be as honest as possible. It is important to bring a list of symptoms, when they began, and how frequently they occur, documented in the form of a journal or a care log. Try to be as specific as possible.

Sharing a list of past and current medical problems will be helpful: Tell your doctor if other family members had illnesses that caused memory problems. And bring a list of all medications, both purchased over-the-counter (vitamins, aspirin) and by prescription. It may be helpful to bring a spouse or relative to the consultation.

While many people experience some changes in memory, thinking, and behavior as they age, cognitive changes that disrupt daily life are **not** a typical part of aging. If you or someone you know is experiencing memory or cognitive problems, it is important to share these concerns with a physician. Only a full medical evaluation conducted by a licensed physician can determine if symptoms are related to dementia. Experts estimate that a skilled physician can diagnose progressive dementia with more than 90 percent accuracy.