

Forgetting Something?

If you or a loved one struggles with memory loss, here's what you can do.

Whether you call it a “senior moment” or “mental-pause,” a memory lapse can be alarming. But how do you know if it's just part of getting old or a cause for concern?

“Dementia is an umbrella term for loss of memory and other thinking abilities that is severe enough to interfere with daily life,” explained Teresa Brown, CDC, program manager with Alzheimer's Association of Greater Missouri.

Dementia results from conditions that affect the brain's ability to communicate. In the brain, a network of nerve cells, or neurons, sends and receives messages to and from the body. Neurons use molecules called neurotransmitters to communicate with other neurons along neural pathways. Our memories are actually stored along these pathways. If part of a neural pathway is damaged, you might struggle to recall memories or form new ones.

Alzheimer's disease, which is the most common form of dementia in the United States, occurs when a build up of protein deposits (amyloid plaques) and malformed proteins (tau tangles) causes neurons to stop working properly and breaks these pathways.

Other common forms of dementia include:

- **Frontotemporal:** Conditions that shrink frontal and temporal lobes
- **Vascular:** Damage after a stroke or multiple strokes
- **Lewy Body:** Protein deposits (Lewy bodies) on neurons
- **Huntington's:** Mutation in the HTT gene causes progressive deterioration

Teresa notes other diseases can mimic dementia symptoms, including diabetes, thyroid issues, depression, vision problems, or hearing loss. If you're concerned about your memory, talk to your primary care provider.

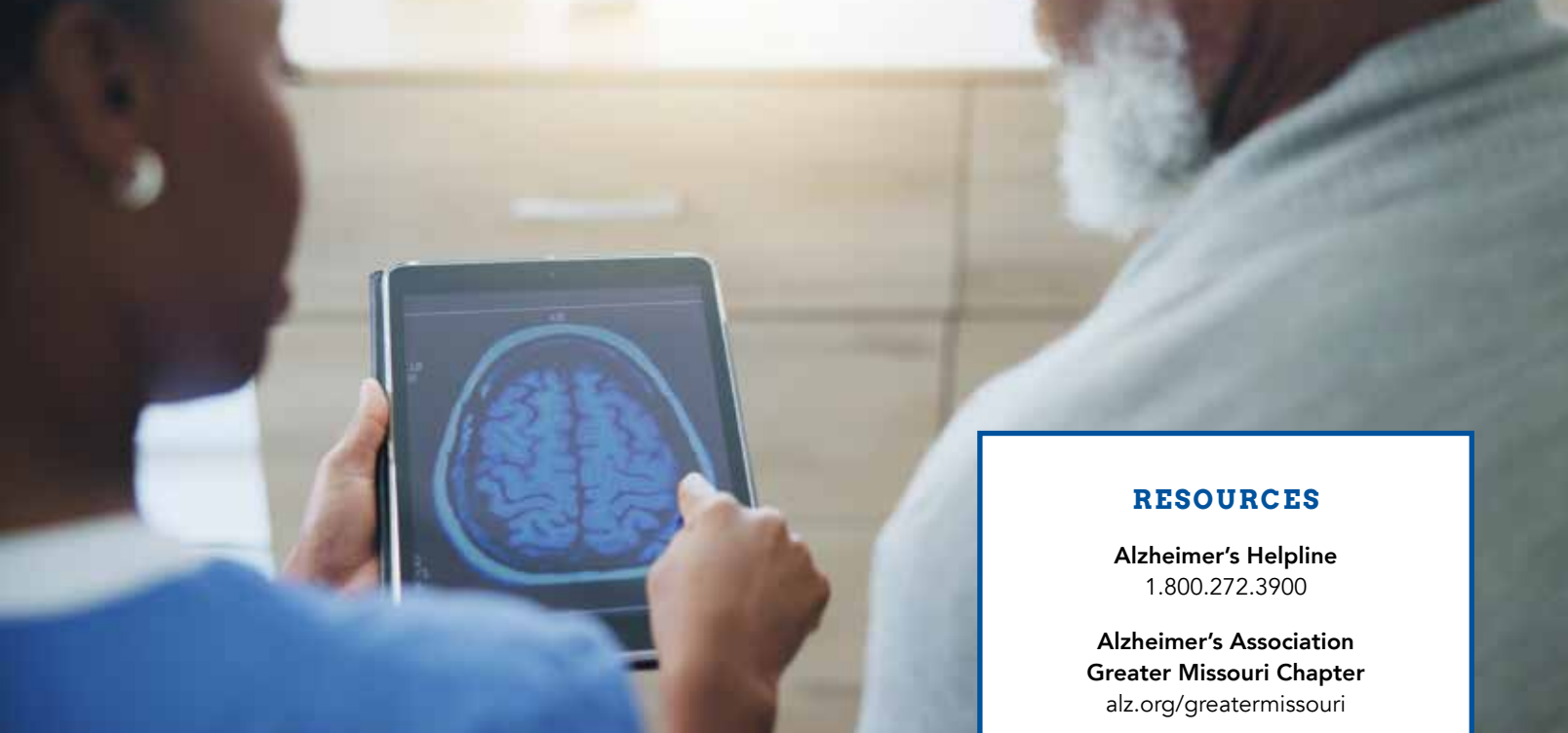


Normal Age-Related Forgetfulness

- You forget something that happened 20 years ago.
- You misplace your car keys, but find them by retracing your steps.
- You can't recall a name or word in the moment but remember it later.
- You need a second to remember where you left off after an interruption.
- You enter a room of your house and briefly forget what you wanted there.
- You accidentally put 2024 when dating a check in 2025.
- You ask a family member to help you set up your new smart TV.

Possible Indicator of Dementia

- You forget something that happened 20 minutes ago.
- You frequently misplace items, sometimes in unusual places, and can't retrace your steps.
- You forget names of close family members or everyday objects.
- You struggle to tell a story, often repeating yourself.
- You feel lost in familiar places, including your home.
- You lose track of what day, season, or year it is.
- You struggle to complete daily tasks, like paying bills, running errands, or self-care.



Dementia or Forgetfulness?

“Normal forgetfulness is misplacing your car keys or not being able to readily come up with a word, but you’re able to retrace your steps or recall the word later,” Teresa said. But memory loss due to dementia can make everyday tasks difficult and impair judgment and speech. Alzheimer’s can also cause vision problems, social withdrawal, and changes in mood, behavior, or personality.

If forgetful episodes worry you, Teresa recommends keeping a log and bringing it with you when you see your primary care provider. You can also do this if you’re concerned about a loved one’s forgetfulness.

Diagnosis, Treatment, and Prevention

While there is currently no cure for Alzheimer’s disease, there are options that may slow progression if detected early. The single best step to take if you suspect you or a loved one has dementia is to make an appointment with a primary care provider. Your provider can review your medical history and medications, conduct a depression screening and neurological exam, and refer you for additional testing.

Alzheimer’s is diagnosed through multiple tests, including imaging the brain with a CT or MRI scanner, and lumbar puncture to test cerebrospinal fluid for Alzheimer’s markers.

“Recently, the FDA cleared the first blood test to aid in diagnosis of Alzheimer’s which could make it easier for individuals to receive an accurate diagnosis earlier in a less medically invasive way,” Teresa said.

While some risk factors for dementia, like age, can’t be avoided, taking good care of your overall health and wellbeing can potentially lower your risk. Annual checkups, a balanced diet, regular exercise, maintaining a healthy weight, and adequate sleep can benefit your entire body.

“What is good for the heart is good for the brain,” Teresa said, adding that Alzheimer’s is often comorbid with heart disease.

Another tip Teresa shared is to use your head. Learning something new helps your neurons form new neural pathways and strengthen existing ones. Challenge your mind by reading, completing challenging puzzles, or learning new skills.

Support for Patients and Caregivers

Dementia affects more than the people who have it – nearly 12 million Americans provide unpaid care for family members with Alzheimer’s and dementia.

“No one wakes up with all the knowledge you need to take care of a parent or a spouse with dementia,” Teresa said. “Your relationship has changed.

RESOURCES

Alzheimer’s Helpline
1.800.272.3900

**Alzheimer’s Association
Greater Missouri Chapter**
alz.org/greatermissouri

Find the **My ALZ Journey app** on the iOS App Store or Google Play.

Join the **Columbia Walk To End Alzheimer’s** on October 4
alz.org/comowalk

Now you need to take on many roles, like attorney, accountant, or dietitian.”

The Alzheimer’s Association website provides resources for people with early-stage Alzheimer’s and their caregivers, including a new, free app called My ALZ Journey. The app can be personalized based on the user, location, and age, and is available for Android and iOS devices. Other resources include education about the disease, real life stories, and links to local community resources including virtual and in-person support groups for patients and caregivers. The association also runs a 24/7 phone hotline to answer questions and provide support. All services are offered free of charge.

Caregivers can struggle with social isolation. If you know someone caring for a parent or spouse with dementia, check in on them and offer to help with errands if you can.

“Be patient and empathetic not only with the person who has the disease, but with their family. This disease will turn worlds upside down and they are doing the best they can,” Teresa said. *By Jessica Park*