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Memory & Aging

“I must have Alzheimer’s!” This is a comment that many people exclaim, starting at perhaps the age of 35-40. And it is heard with increasing frequency as people age. Why does memory loss affect so many people, and what can be done about it?

First, a few facts. Alzheimer’s is the leading cause of dementia and memory loss among the elderly, but it is not the only reason. Alzheimer’s is a disease that afflicts people more in the later years of life, and is relatively infrequent among the younger group of seniors. It affects roughly 3% of those age 65, 10% at 75, and about 50% at the age of 85.

Having said that, memory impairment can be due to a number of other factors, not all of which are irreversible. Beyond Alzheimer’s, other reasons for memory impairment include strokes, which is another leading cause of dementia. Risk factors for incurring a stroke include age, along with medical factors such as high blood pressure, diabetes, cigarette smoking, and atrial fibrillation. Nothing can be done about age, but the other risk factors may be controlled, reduced or eliminated through a variety of means, which can have many beneficial effects on one’s physical and mental health.

Medication can also cause memory impairment. This article is far too brief to offer a discussion of the different types of drugs, and what they might each do to a person in regards side effects.

One suggestion that can be offered here is that if a new medication is begun and the person's memory seems to worsen shortly after it is started, have a discussion with the prescribing physician if the drug may be the culprit. The memory loss may be caused by the drug, or it may just be a coincidence. You should fully expect it being unlikely to find a medication which will have no side effects whatsoever in an elderly person. But, it is reasonable to ask a doctor to help find drugs for you that have the fewest and/or the least objectionable side effects while still effectively treating the medical problem.

A third possible cause of memory loss is depression. Many people smile and laugh on the outside, but suffer silently on the inside. So don't judge a book by its cover. As people age depression and suicide can occur with increasing frequency. There are numerous factors that can bring on depression, including

- ❖ the death of loved ones (spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends, relatives)
- ❖ health problems which may include terminal conditions such as cancer
- ❖ medication side effects
- ❖ genetic risk factors, such as a history of depression in the family and/or the individual
- ❖ situational stress (financial problems, divorce, being put in to a nursing home or assisted living facility)
- ❖ social isolation
- ❖ retirement

Other possible reasons why memory can be affected include blows to the head (such as slips and falls with the head being struck such as on the floor or a coffee table edge, or from car

accidents), acute medical problems like urinary tract infections (UTI's) or surgery for any number of conditions, or other neurological diseases (e.g. Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis).

What can be done about memory impairment? Some ideas already have been offered. Discuss it with your physician. Work on decreasing your risk factors such as high blood pressure or cigarette smoking. Eat healthy, and exercise in an appropriate manner as recommended by your physician. Deal with what is causing depression, such as through support from family and friends, clergy, or seeking appropriate professional consultation as needed.

