

# Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)

## *What do we do now?*

## Definition of MCI

Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) is a condition characterized by significant cognitive impairment in the absence of dementia. It primarily affects memory but it might cause changes in daily function in subtle ways. Memory changes from MCI are not part of normal aging and should be discussed with a physician.

MCI is different from Alzheimer's disease or other dementias. It does not typically affect a person's ability to complete daily tasks or cause general confusion.

Most people with MCI can live independently. Generally, they have no significant difficulty thinking and can carry on conversations, participate in community activities, and drive. They do tend to be forgetful and are prone to mix up the sequence of doing tasks that have multiple steps.



*We all have our "senior moments", but he does have a tendency to forget where he's put things and all.*

Rosa, wife, age 69

## Recognizing Signs & Symptoms

If MCI progresses, memory problems become more noticeable. Family and friends may begin to notice signs such as

- repeating the same question over and over again.
- retelling the same stories or providing the same information repeatedly.
- lack of initiative in beginning or completing activities.
- trouble managing number-related tasks such as bill paying.
- lack of focus during conversations and activities.
- inability to follow multi-step directions.

*I see her having some memory problems. It comes and goes. Sometimes it is quite evident to me and then days will go by and I don't see anything.*

Len, husband, age 89

*I read my newspaper everyday because I'm interested in what's going on, but now I read it and I couldn't tell you two minutes later what I've read.*

Frances, who has MCI, age 74



## Why Seek Medical Help?

Many people believe that memory loss is a normal part of aging and do not think they need to seek medical help. Others delay seeing the doctor because they want to avoid hearing the truth about their condition.

In fact, memory problems can result from a variety of medical conditions. An examination by a physician can rule out the existence of other conditions and may provide treatments and strategies to reduce non-MCI-related memory problems as well as helping with MCI.

## Seeking Diagnosis

Making an appointment with a family doctor to discuss concerns about memory loss is the first step toward seeking a diagnosis.

After an initial assessment, the doctor may make a referral to a memory clinic for further evaluation. Neurologists and geriatric psychiatrists are also able to address memory-related concerns and make a referral for further testing if necessary.

## Diagnosing MCI

MCI is difficult to diagnose because

- no specific test has been developed to diagnose it.
- not everyone will exhibit all of the signs and symptoms.
- evidence of memory problems appears gradually.
- other health issues may be contributing to changes in memory.
- Some people think memory loss is a normal part of aging, but it isn't.

In diagnosing MCI, the doctor may

- ask a series of questions that test memory, language skills, recall, attention span, and visual-spatial abilities.
- review current health records and medications.
- rule out depression and other emotional health concerns.
- order additional testing and brain imaging as necessary.
- talk to family members or others close to the person to learn about changes they have noticed in memory, personality, and behavior.

During future visits, similar tests will be conducted to determine if memory loss is getting worse. Do not be surprised if your primary care doctor wants this follow-up to be done by a specialist.

## Medications for MCI

At this time, there is no known cure for MCI or way of stopping or reversing its effects. However, research shows that medications prescribed for persons with Alzheimer's disease may help people with MCI focus better and think more clearly. Ask a doctor for information on current therapies.

*Lou has always had a very good memory. But he is such a tease that it's hard to tell sometimes whether he is teasing or whether he really means it or not. I thought either he doesn't want to tell me or he's just teasing me.*

Leslie, wife, age 80

## Reactions to Having MCI

Each person responds differently to having memory loss. Some people...

### **feel frustrated and annoyed at themselves.**

- A simple task now takes a great deal of time and effort to complete.

### **respond by laughing and joking about their forgetfulness.**

- Making light of memory problems may disguise the true nature of memory loss and often delays recognition by doctors, friends, and family.

### **withdraw and isolate themselves.**

- Withdrawal may lead to depression, which is common among individuals with memory loss. Depression is treatable and not a normal side effect of MCI.

*We went on a trip for two weeks, and I was with her 24/7. That's when I first noticed it. In fact, the tour guide asked me if she had Alzheimer's. I didn't realize anybody else could really notice anything. But that's the first time I really realized it.*

Florence, close friend, age 66



## Reactions of Family & Friends to MCI

Family and friends often have a difficult time accepting memory loss as a real medical problem.

Some people falsely believe that the person experiencing memory loss is

- lazy and intentionally avoiding things that need to be done.
- purposefully trying to annoy them by pretending to forget.
- trying to get attention by claiming to have memory loss.

When family and friends spend more time with the person having MCI, they begin to understand its seriousness and how it influences daily life.

*We have been married 55 years in April and were high school sweethearts. So, this is kind of like your arm being cut off.*

Jean, wife, age 72

## Strategies for Family & Friends

Despite having memory loss, people with MCI still want to feel useful, productive, and independent. Most report not wanting to be a burden on their families. The following approaches help promote healthy and positive relationships:

### Be supportive & encouraging

- Accept the memory loss as real.
- Allow people with MCI to complete their daily routine at their own pace.
- Provide uninterrupted moments to allow for recalling information.
- Encourage nurturance by suggesting responsibility for caring for a pet or plants.
- Encourage usefulness by suggesting responsibility for completing household tasks.
- Promote feelings of success by giving one task to complete at a time.
- Help the person stay physically healthy
- Avoid becoming overprotective.

### Be patient & respectful

- Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of MCI.
- Treat the person like an adult.
- Include the person in social events and community activities.
- Respond to the same question as if it were the first time, every time.
- Avoid beginning or ending sentences with “I already told you...”
- Avoid interrupting people with MCI when they are speaking.
- Avoid talking about people with MCI without including them in the conversation.
- Simplify speaking style only if those with MCI tell you that they do not understand you.

*You got to have patience... and a sense of humor, too.*

Janice, wife, age 74



*Don't blame yourself... You didn't cause the problem and you can't fix it, and you have to get used to the change. It's gonna happen.*

Quentin, husband, age 67

### Internet Resources

For more information on MCI visit the following websites. Type the term “MCI” into the search box at each site to access information.

AARP  
<http://www.aarp.org/>

Alzheimer's Association  
<http://www.alz.org>

Mayo Clinic  
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/>

National Institute on Aging  
<http://www.nia.nih.gov/>

University of California, San Francisco Memory and Aging Center  
<http://memory.ucsf.edu/Education/Disease/mci.html>

# Strategies to Compensate for Memory Loss

## Daily Tasks & Appointments

- Keep a pen and a calendar with large writing spaces near the telephone.
- Write medical appointments, birthdays, church services, meetings, social activities, trash pick-up, due dates for bills, and car inspections on the calendar.
- Do not agree to an appointment until you have checked it against the calendar.
- Write a daily to-do list and keep it in a visible spot.

## Medication Management

- Keep daily medications organized and in a visible location.
- Use a pill box organized by days and times.
- Set pill bottles on the table or next to the bed as reminders to take the medication.
- Label pill bottle tops with different colors, each representing a different time of day.



## Household Responsibilities

- Keep bills and important papers in a visible place, not tucked away in a desk, basket, or cupboard.
- Write reminder notes. Carry a pocket-sized notepad or place a notebook on the kitchen table or by a favorite chair and write down things to do or important information.

## Driving

- Drive when the traffic is light and allow plenty of time to get to places.
- Drive during clear weather and during daylight hours.
- Take advantage of public transportation and people's offer to give you a ride.

## Communication

- Keep using the same cell phone and small electronics, such as cameras, to eliminate confusion from switching to a new model.
- Program frequently used phone numbers into the phone's speed dial feature.
- Use a cell phone to check in with family throughout the day.
- Use a tape recorder to save important matters you want to tell others.
- Use walkie-talkies to keep track of others when shopping or spending time out in the community.

*I make lists. I keep a complete calendar in the office, of what is coming up... you know, bill paying, pay taxes, get the yards mowed, stake the tomatoes.*

Trent, who has MCI, age 65

# Strategies for Care Partners

## Caring for Yourself

Living with a person with MCI or being a care partner can present challenges and cause stress. To maintain a positive and healthy outlook on life:

- Take one day at a time - some days are better than others.
- Pick your battles, don't sweat the small stuff.
- Use coping strategies recommended by a professional and do the best you can.
- Ask family, friends, and health professionals for help and information.
- Be willing to accept help.
- Learn to manage your feelings effectively.
- Talk to others with similar experiences or join a memory loss support group.



*My therapy is dishes. People think I am wacky. I love doing dishes, so that's my therapy. My other therapy is working in my flowerbeds.*

Eloise, wife, age 60

## Looking to the Future

Memory loss associated with MCI may progress and worsen over time. To cope with and manage future needs and challenges:

- Enable the person with MCI to remain independent for as long as possible.
- Investigate housing and care options in the community that can assist in care and oversight, such as meal programs, transportation, and adult day services.
- Create a family fund into which all family members can make donations so that future uncovered expenses are not a burden on any particular family member.
- Develop strategies to prevent someone with MCI from entering into unneeded financial agreements:
  - Implement a system to block tele-marketers from calling.
  - Intercept daily mail and remove special offers for merchandise.
  - Divert mail to another address and produce it only when paying bills.
- Keep current on information about MCI and treatment options.

## About the Research

This report presents information from interviews with 99 families in which one member has MCI. Interviews took place during 2004–2006. Each participant answered questions about recognizing memory loss, how it affects daily life, coping strategies, and plans for the future. Patients and staff with the memory disorder clinics at the Salem Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Carilion Center for Healthy Aging, and EVMS Glennan Center for Geriatrics and Gerontology assisted with this project.

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