

Maximising your thinking and memory abilities

Your health & lifestyle

Is it impacting on your thinking and memory?

If you answer “Yes” to any of the following questions, it might be time to try some new approaches to your health, lifestyle and wellbeing, to help you improve your memory. Talking to a supportive health professionals, such as your general practitioner, is often an important first step in finding out what can be done.

HEALTH

1 Do you suffer from a medical illness?

Physical illness can contribute to memory and thinking problems. Conditions such as fever, infection, heart disease, dehydration, anaemia, low blood sugar and recovery from surgery are all associated with a “foggy” state of mind, which can impair concentration and memory.

TIPS

- “Be kind to yourself” and don’t take too much on during periods of ill health
- Have regular medical check-ups to best manage any illness

2 Are you taking medication?

Older adults take a lot of prescription medications; about a third of older adults consume three or more prescription drugs every day. Some may also take herbal supplements. These medications and supplements affect biological processes in the body, and some can influence thinking and memory.

TIPS

- If you are concerned, ask your doctor or pharmacist to review your current medications and herbal supplements

About this handout

Many health and lifestyle factors can impact on thinking and memory abilities, especially as we get older.

This handout describes:

- How health and lifestyle may impact on thinking and memory
- Some general tips about how to manage health and lifestyle issues
- Other sources of information and support that may be helpful.

HEALTH



3 Do you have chronic pain?

Many people with chronic pain experience problems with thinking and memory in their day-to-day lives, including forgetfulness, reduced attention and difficulty finishing tasks. These memory problems may be the result of disturbed sleep, medications to treat pain, or increased stress levels.

TIPS

- See your general practitioner or medical specialist for medical management of your pain issues
- Other health practitioners (e.g., physiotherapists and psychologists) can also assist to develop strategies for managing pain

4 Do you have problems with your vision or hearing?

Is your vision declining as you age? Are you waiting for treatment for cataracts? Do you suffer from glaucoma? Is your family complaining that you don't hear what they say or are speaking too loudly? Are you struggling to hear what is being said in a crowd?

Even subtle vision or hearing impairments can affect our capacity to take in and process information. They may increase the effort required to focus on and remember information. This may in turn impact on your capacity to undertake more complex activities, including socialising.

TIPS

- It is important to make sure that you have up-to-date glasses or hearing aids and that you put them to good use

LIFESTYLE

5 Are you eating regular healthy meals?

Skipping meals or eating a lot of fatty, unhealthy food can reduce your energy levels. This can have an impact on your concentration levels and lead to poor memory and thinking in day-to-day life.

TIPS

- The basics of a healthy diet include eating a variety of foods (including five portions of fruit and vegetables per day) and minimising high fat foods
- It is also important to avoid dehydration; try to drink regularly through the day

6 Are you getting enough exercise?

The physical and psychological benefits of regular exercise are numerous. They include reduced stress levels and improved brain function.

TIPS

- Any exercise is better than none
- A moderate level of exercise seems to work best. This means you should be exercising hard enough to raise your heartbeat; you should still be able to talk comfortably, but not sing!
- About 30 minutes of moderate physical exercise on at least 5 days of every week is recommended. This can be done in one session or broken up into separate sessions

WELLBEING



7 Do you have poor sleep?

Poor sleep has a bigger impact on our thinking and memory than people usually believe. Fatigue is a common cause of lapses in attention and concentration and is often associated with car accidents. Many medical conditions may interfere with sleep as people get older. Untreated sleep apnoea is also associated with poor quality sleep. Other lifestyle issues, including night-time shift work, are well-known to have a negative impact on the quality of your sleep.

TIPS

- Try to develop a very regular routine: get up and go to bed at the same time every day
- Refrain from exercise or stimulants such as tea or coffee at least 4 hours before bedtime

8 Do you drink too much alcohol, or use drugs?

If you drink alcohol, avoid binge drinking altogether. Risky levels of drinking or use of illicit substances can impact on both physical and mental health. Alcohol can also interact with medication. Alcohol has a brief mood-lifting effect, but later causes feelings of depression. Any short-term relief provided by alcohol or illicit substances doesn't last. When alcohol or drugs are over-used, they can cause long-term harm, including problems with brain function.

TIPS

- If you are concerned, ask your doctor about safe levels of consumption

9 Are you stressed or anxious?

Stress and anxiety are probably the number one cause of day-to-day errors in memory and thinking. Sometimes we are preoccupied with our worries, resulting in fewer available brain resources to deal with the here and now. This can be a problem, particularly if you have recently experienced a stressful life event such as sudden illness or moving house. People who take on the care of loved ones with substantial physical or cognitive problems are especially likely to experience high levels of stress.

TIPS

- Be kind to yourself - take time out and use relaxation techniques

10 Do you think you might be depressed?

Are you down and miserable? Have you lost interest in some of your normal interests and activities? Are you struggling to sleep at night; do you feel tired and fatigued, or have you lost your appetite? Have you recently suffered from any major losses or setbacks such as the death of a close family member or serious health problems? If this is the case, you may be depressed. Depression is often associated with difficulties concentrating and thinking clearly; your memory may also be affected.

TIPS

- Seek out support and share your concerns with friends and family
- Try to do more things that you enjoy (such as socialising, walking on the beach or playing music) and fewer of the things you don't
- If you continue to feel down for more than two weeks talk it over with your doctor



Further information and support:

A book you may find helpful:

Gates, N. (2016). *A Brain for Life: How to optimise your brain's health by making simple lifestyle changes now*. Sydney: ABC books.

Organisations and websites:

Alcohol Information

(www.alcohol.gov.au) is an Australian Government website with a range of information materials on recommended guidelines as well as contact details for support services.

Dementia Australia

(www.dementia.org.au) has developed a range of materials called "Your Brain Matters", designed to inform Australians about ways to reduce their risk of developing dementia.

Australian Department of Health and Ageing

(www.health.gov.au) has a website which includes guidelines and information about the components of a healthy diet and physical activity.

Australian Hearing

(www.hearing.com.au; phone: 131797) is a government organisation that provides hearing services to maximise quality of life.

Beyondblue

(www.beyondblue.org.au, phone: 1300 22 46 36) provides a range of support services and information for people suffering from depression, anxiety and related disorders.

Carers Australia

(www.carersaustralia.com.au, phone: 1800 242 636) provides a range of support services for people who take on caring roles for family members across Australia.

Carers Gateway

(www.carersgateway.gov.au; phone 1800422737) is a government-funded organisation which provides practical support and advice, counseling and referral to other support services for carers.

Chronic Pain Australia

(www.chronicpinaustralia.org.au) is a community advocacy and support organisation with a large number of resources for chronic pain sufferers, including information and help sheets and a telephone support line.

Vision Australia

(www.visionaustralia.org.au) provides blindness and low vision services in Australia to maximise quality of life.