ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH UK FOR A CURE

WHAT IS MILD COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT?

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides information about mild cognitive impairment. It's for anyone who wants to know more about the condition, or who might be worried about their own or someone else's memory and thinking.

The information here does not replace advice that doctors, pharmacists, or nurses may give you. If you are worried about your health, including memory and thinking problems, you should speak with your doctor as soon as possible.

This booklet was updated in November 2025 and is due to be reviewed in November 2027. It was written by Alzheimer's Research UK's Information Services team with input from lay and expert reviewers. Please get in touch using the contact details below if you would like a version with references or in a different format.

ANY QUESTIONS

If you have questions about dementia or dementia research, you can contact our Dementia Research Infoline on **0300 111 5111** or email **infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org** or write to us using the address on the back page.

WHAT IS MILD COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT?

Mild cognitive impairment, or MCI, is when someone has problems with memory or thinking that are worse than expected for their age. These problems are noticeable but not severe. They do not get in the way of daily life.

MCI is not a disease itself. It is a term used to describe these changes. MCI is not the same as dementia. But for some people, it can develop into conditions like Alzheimer's disease.

Mild – not severe.

Cognitive – to do with the way our brains think, plan and understand.

Impairment – not working as well as it should.

When MCI is not caused by Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia, **memory and thinking problems may go back to normal with the right treatment**.

As we get older, we may notice our memory and thinking naturally gets a bit worse. For a person with MCI, these problems are worse than expected for their age. But unlike dementia, these problems may not get in the way of day-to-day life.

It is difficult to say exactly how common MCI is. Experts think the actual number of people with MCI maybe higher than those with a diagnosis, because people may not have seen their GP about their memory and thinking problems.

WHAT CAUSES MILD COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT?

MCI can be caused by a range of existing health problems. These include:

- depression, stress, and anxiety
- vitamin deficiencies
- thyroid disorders
- autoimmune conditions
- infections
- side effects from medication
- sleep disorders (such as sleep apnoea, where someone finds it harder to breathe while they're sleeping).

MCI can also be caused by the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, or other types of dementia.

It is important to know what is causing a person's MCI. Research has shown that some of the conditions listed on the previous page can increase someone's risk of dementia in the future. These include sleep apnoea, some autoimmune diseases and depression. Many of these can be treated or managed if they are diagnosed early.

When someone's MCI is caused by the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, their memory and thinking problems will get worse over time. Knowing the cause will help doctors to decide the best treatment and support to offer.

WHAT DO DOCTORS MEAN BY 'MCI DUE TO ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE'?

When tests show signs of changes in the brain linked to Alzheimer's, doctors at the memory clinic may use the term 'mild cognitive impairment (MCI) due to Alzheimer's disease'. This term is only used in cases where symptoms are not affecting daily life.

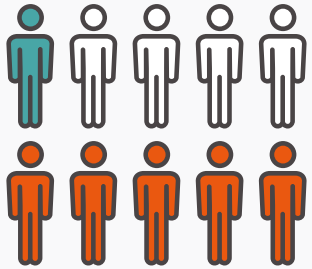
Knowing that the cause of MCI is due to Alzheimer's disease helps guide the advice doctors give, the treatments they offer, and whether someone might be suitable for research studies.

Tests that look for changes in the brain are more likely to be offered in memory clinics which are part of a hospital, and would not be available through a GP appointment alone.

HOW IS MCI LINKED TO DEMENTIA?

When MCI is caused by the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia or another type of dementia, symptoms will get worse and start to affect a person's ability to carry out daily activities. If you notice your symptoms getting worse, you can speak with your doctor.

Experts believe that almost half of people with MCI due to Alzheimer's disease will develop dementia within three to four years. But this can vary from one person to another. The symptoms of MCI do not normally affect daily life, but everyone's experience is different.



EVERY YEAR, FOR EVERY TEN PEOPLE DIAGNOSED WITH MCI...

One will go on to develop dementia.

Five may see their symptoms get better, depending on the cause.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MCI AND DEMENTIA?

The word dementia describes a group of symptoms that affect a person's ability to carry out daily activities. It is caused by a range of diseases, with Alzheimer's being the most common. Dementia symptoms include:

- memory problems
- confusion
- communication difficulties
- mood changes.

A person with dementia will usually have at least two of these symptoms, which get worse over time. Someone with MCI has mild symptoms and may not be affected in as many ways. So, people with MCI are usually able to work, drive and manage day-to-day tasks safely and without support from other people.

Symptoms of MCI may include:

Memory problems: Misplacing items or having trouble remembering recent conversations.

Changes in attention: Finding it difficult to concentrate, such as while watching a TV programme or carrying out duties at work.

Communication difficulties, such as problems finding the right words.

Changes to thinking skills: Problems with planning or completing tasks, e.g. managing money, or cooking a meal.

Disorientation: Confusion about time, date or place.

Changes to mood and behaviour: Becoming irritable, anxious, or feeling low.

These symptoms may affect someone with MCI all the time, or they might come and go. This will depend on the underlying cause. Anyone worried about their health, including mild changes to their memory and thinking, should make an appointment with their doctor as soon as possible. Getting an early and accurate diagnosis is important.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosing the cause of memory and thinking problems early is important. It means you can get the right help and support.

With the correct diagnosis, you may also be able to take part in research. If you are diagnosed with MCI due to Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia, or you are at an increased risk, you may be able to take part in dementia research, including new treatment trials.

Your doctor is the first person to see if you are worried about your memory or thinking. Keeping track of symptoms in a diary and bringing it with you can help when speaking to your doctor.

A family member or person that supports you can help keep the diary, as there may be symptoms you do not notice.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO DOWNLOAD OUR SYMPTOM CHECKLIST.

This checklist doesn't include every dementia symptom, but it can help someone have a conversation about their concerns.

When you go to the GP with memory and thinking concerns, the GP may:

Ask about your symptoms and how they are affecting you.

Ask a relative or close friend if they have noticed any changes.

Check your medical history.

Run a blood test to rule out some causes of memory and thinking problems that can be treated if caught early. These include vitamin deficiencies and thyroid disorders.

Give you a physical check-up, checking your blood pressure and balance.

Ask you to do some memory and thinking tests.

Ask you for a urine sample.

GETTING A REFERRAL

If these conditions have been ruled out, your GP may refer you to a memory clinic or other specialist clinic for further tests to find out the cause of your MCI.

These tests may include:

A brain scan to look for signs of dementia, such as brain shrinkage. This might be an MRI or CT scan.

In-depth memory tests.

In-depth tests like a PET scan or lumbar puncture can show that someone has very early Alzheimer's disease. In this case, a doctor would diagnose MCI due to Alzheimer's disease (see page 8). However, PET scans and lumbar punctures are not common in NHS memory clinics run by mental health or community trusts. They are more likely to be offered in hospital-based memory clinics.

Because MCI affects people differently and has many causes, some people experience difficulties getting their symptoms diagnosed. This means it can take longer than usual to get the right diagnosis.

You can find more information about how memory problems are diagnosed in our booklet **'Getting a dementia diagnosis'**.

If you are diagnosed with MCI, your doctor can talk to you about the next steps.

As people with MCI have a higher risk of developing dementia, symptoms should be monitored closely over time. If you notice they do get worse, you can go to the GP as soon as possible and ask for a referral to the memory clinic for follow up tests.

TREATMENTS

For people where the underlying cause of MCI is a treatable condition, like a thyroid disorder or vitamin deficiency, their doctor may prescribe treatments to manage the condition.

Research is being carried out into non-drug treatments for MCI, such as memory training and computer-based brain training. So far, the results have been mixed.

The doctor may suggest practical tips to help manage symptoms, like keeping a calendar or diary. They may also recommend some ways to improve your brain health, listed on page 21.

In people who have MCI which is caused by the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, there are two new medications licensed to slow down the underlying disease. They are not available through the NHS. Find out more at **alzres.uk/treatment** or get in touch using the contact details on the back of this booklet.

New dementia treatments are only possible because people take part in research. To find out more about taking part in clinical trials or other research studies, visit **alzres.uk/research** or ask for our booklet **'Getting involved in dementia research'**.

SUPPORT

There is help and support available for those worried about or affected by MCI or dementia.

Dementia Research Infoline

If you have questions about MCI or dementia, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, or about taking part in research you can contact the Dementia Research Infoline **0300 111 5111** or **infoline@alzheimersresearchuk.org**

Admiral Nurse Helpline

If you are struggling to get a diagnosis and are worried about your symptoms, you can speak with dementia specialist nurses via the Admiral Nurse Helpline **0800 888 6678** or **helpline@dementiauk.org**

Alzheimer's Society

Alzheimer's Society provides information about dementia care, and support for people affected by dementia in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Call **0333 150 3456** or email **dementia.connect@alzheimers.org**

Alzheimer Scotland

Alzheimer Scotland provides dementia support advice and information about local services in Scotland. Call **0808 808 3000** or email **helpline@alzscot.org**

RISK FACTORS FOR MCI

A risk factor is something that can change our likelihood of developing a disease.

While there is no guaranteed way to prevent MCI, there are steps we can take to keep our brains as healthy as possible. These can help reduce the risk of dementia too. Further information about the risk factors for dementia can be found in our booklet **'Reducing your risk of dementia'**.

Steps we can take to keep our brains healthy include:

Not smoking: If you smoke, quitting smoking is one the best things you can do for you brain health.

Doing regular physical activity: Aim for at least 150 minutes of exercise per week.

Keeping social: Such as staying in touch with friends and being active in your community.

Eating a healthy balanced diet: With plenty of fruits, vegetables and nuts. Try to reduce dairy products and red meat.

Limiting the amount of alcohol we drink: Aim for less than 14 units per week.

Looking after your physical health: By keeping blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels in check.

Staying sharp: By doing regular brain training such as puzzles and word games.

RESEARCH

Alzheimer's Research UK is the UK's leading dementia research charity. We exist to change the way dementia is treated, diagnosed and prevented. And then, we will find a way to cure it.

To do this, we have invested over £245 million in dementia research. We work with the most forward-thinking scientists and world-class organisations. Through research, we are beginning to understand what causes MCI and who is most likely to go on to develop dementia.

If you have been diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment and would like to share your story to inspire others or to help shape our work, please get in touch via **stories@alzheimersresearchuk.org**

With your support, we will fund many more studies into MCI and dementia. We promise we will not stop until dementia can no longer destroy lives.

We are Alzheimer's Research UK.
We exist for a cure.

STAY UP-TO-DATE WITH THE LATEST DEMENTIA RESEARCH

Call **0300 111 5555** or scan the QR code.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Research is the only way we'll find new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat MCI and dementia and scientists need your help. Without people volunteering to take part in research, finding a cure would be impossible.

People with MCI, dementia, and people without dementia are all needed to take part.

Anyone over the age of 18 can register to Join Dementia Research, which is a service run by the NHS. This will match you to research studies you are suitable for. Then you get to choose which ones to take part in.

People have many different reasons for wanting to volunteer for dementia research, and it's their support that will drive forward our progress and change the lives of everyone affected by dementia.

Join them today.

Find out more and register to take part by calling the Dementia Research Infoline on **0300 111 5111** or visiting **joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk**

Join dementia research

Alzheimer's Research UK is the UK's leading dementia research charity.

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or scan the QR code

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