

# Mild Cognitive Impairment

Alzheimer *Society*

Other Dementias

## What is Mild Cognitive Impairment?

We all forget things from time to time and this can become more frequent as we get older. However, sometimes a person may experience cognitive changes that are not expected for someone their age. Mild cognitive impairment is a clinical condition in which someone has problems with memory, language, thinking or judgement that are greater than what we would expect with normal aging. People with mild cognitive impairment are at a higher risk of developing dementia, with 10-15% of people with mild cognitive impairment developing dementia each year.

In this sheet you will find information on what a person with mild cognitive impairment can do to reduce their risk of developing dementia.

## Subtypes of mild cognitive impairment

- **Amnesic mild cognitive impairment** is the most common subtype, where memory loss is the main symptom.
- In **non-amnesic mild cognitive impairment** memory is not the main difficulty; instead, other thinking abilities such as organizing and planning, reasoning, learning or judgement may be affected.

## What are the symptoms of mild cognitive impairment?

A person with mild cognitive impairment may experience the following symptoms:

- **Memory problems.** For the majority of people who have mild cognitive impairment, memory is the ability most affected. For example, frequently forgetting important information such as appointments, conversations, or recent events.
- **Impaired thinking skills.** For example, frequently losing a train of thought, having difficulty organizing or planning.
- **Language difficulties.** For example, having trouble finding the right word.
- **Disorientation in time and space.** For example, getting lost in a familiar environment.
- **Poor judgement.** For example, wearing a jacket on a hot summer day.
- **Impaired depth perception.** For example, confusing a dark rug for a hole in the ground.

The symptoms of mild cognitive impairment are not as severe as those seen in people with dementia and not usually serious enough to impact a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

## How is mild cognitive impairment diagnosed?

A medical professional diagnoses mild cognitive impairment by evaluating a person's cognitive and behavioural changes, considering all the possible causes and talking with the person about the severity and frequency of the symptoms. Although the person may be given a number of tests to help assess their symptoms, there is no specific test that can diagnose mild cognitive impairment. If mild cognitive impairment is suspected, a number of physical and cognitive tests will most likely be performed. The diagnostic process may include:

- a thorough medical history
- assessing the person's ability to perform everyday activities
- observations from a family member or trusted friend
- cognitive screening tests
- neurological examination
- mood evaluation
- tests to measure the person's blood pressure, cholesterol levels, thyroid function and vitamin levels
- neuropsychological tests which measure judgement, planning, problem-solving, reasoning and memory

## Benefits of getting a diagnosis

- ✓ A diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment helps to identify people who are at risk of developing dementia. If the person with mild cognitive impairment ends up developing dementia, they are more likely to get an early diagnosis and early access to evidence-based treatments and support.
- ✓ An early diagnosis allows the person and their family to receive practical information, education and support, and it helps them develop a plan for the future.
- ✓ When a person is diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment they can choose to participate in clinical trials. Clinical trials help researchers investigate several things, including if a new treatment is better than available treatments and if treatments or care practices are safe.

## How are mild cognitive impairment and dementia related?

A person with mild cognitive impairment has an increased risk of developing dementia. It is estimated that only 10 to 15% of people with mild cognitive impairment develop dementia each year. However, mild cognitive impairment does not always lead to dementia, and many people remain stable or improve over time. Because of this, it is important to monitor the symptoms and arrange for your family doctor or geriatrician to reassess the person six months or a year after the diagnosis.

Amnesic mild cognitive impairment, where the main problem is memory, has a stronger association with Alzheimer's disease than nonamnesic mild cognitive impairment. In some cases, the brain changes seen in people with amnesic mild cognitive impairment are similar to the changes seen in Alzheimer's disease, although they tend to be less severe.

Some people with nonamnesic mild cognitive impairment may develop frontotemporal dementia or Lewy body dementia, and either type of mild cognitive impairment may lead to vascular dementia.

Because research on mild cognitive impairment is still at an early stage, it is not yet possible to predict with certainty whether a specific person will go on to develop dementia, remain stable, or improve over time.

## How does mild cognitive impairment impact the person and their family members?

- While mild cognitive impairment does not significantly reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities, it can influence how successfully the person manages new, less familiar, or complex tasks such as financial management or work responsibilities.
- Mild cognitive impairment can also affect the person's mood, social interactions, self-confidence and ability to organize, plan and make decisions.
- Because of the changes caused by mild cognitive impairment, family members may need to take on new roles and responsibilities. For example, family members may need to help the person with finances to compensate for their memory loss or other cognitive decline.
- Family members may also feel a sense of loss and have difficulty coping emotionally with the changes they see in a relative experiencing cognitive decline.

## How is mild cognitive impairment treated?

There are currently no drugs approved to treat mild cognitive impairment. Research is ongoing to develop drugs that may prevent or slow the progression of mild cognitive impairment to dementia.



Adhering to a healthy lifestyle can help improve the person's brain health, daily functioning, and quality of life. It is recommended for the person with mild cognitive impairment to participate in social activities, make healthy food choices, be physically active, and challenge their brain. For more information about brain health, please visit [www.alzheimer.ca/brainhealth](http://www.alzheimer.ca/brainhealth)

Leading a healthy lifestyle can also improve daily cognitive functioning and may reduce the risk of mild cognitive impairment progressing to dementia.

Studies show that potentially treatable causes of cognitive decline are found in 10 to 30% of people with mild cognitive impairment. Treatable causes include medication side effects, thyroid problems, sleep apnea, vitamin B deficiency, depression and anxiety. Unrecognized or untreated difficulties with hearing or vision may also contribute to difficulties with cognitive abilities. Identifying and properly treating conditions that might be contributing to cognitive problems can often lessen those symptoms.

## Living well with mild cognitive impairment

There is much that a person with mild cognitive impairment can do to live well with mild cognitive impairment and to reduce their chances of developing dementia.



A healthy, balanced diet and regular physical activity can help maintain the person's brain health.



Staying socially connected and mentally stimulated through a variety of relationships, activities and interests will enhance the person's quality of life, and boost brain health.



Because a lack of sleep and stress have been shown to impair memory, good sleep habits and the use of relaxation techniques to reduce stress can maximize cognitive abilities.

A person with mild cognitive impairment may also benefit from learning practical memory strategies that can be applied in everyday life. These might include using:

- memory aids, such as electronic calendars on a smart phone or computer
- paper-based aids, like calendars, diaries, lists and pocket notebooks
- voicemail to leave messages as reminders
- internal memory strategies, such as using visual images of something specific you want to remember, or making information meaningful, such as the name Carol, by thinking of a favourite Christmas carol

A diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment can lead to many unanswered questions. By seeking out information, education and support, people with mild cognitive impairment and family members can learn strategies to help them live well with this condition.

## Useful resources:

Whether you are experiencing mild cognitive impairment or a form of dementia, your local Alzheimer Society is there to provide information and support.

Visit the Alzheimer Society's website at [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca) or contact your local Alzheimer Society.

- Alzheimer's Association (US): [www.alz.org/dementia/mild-cognitive-impairment-mci.asp](http://www.alz.org/dementia/mild-cognitive-impairment-mci.asp)
- Alzheimer's Society (UK): [www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/types-dementia/mild-cognitive-impairment-mci](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/types-dementia/mild-cognitive-impairment-mci)
- Anderson, Nicole, Murphy, Kelly, Troyer, Angela, *Living with Mild Cognitive Impairment*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Mayo Clinic: [www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mild-cognitive-impairment/symptoms-causes/syc-20354578](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mild-cognitive-impairment/symptoms-causes/syc-20354578)

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# Alzheimer Society

Alzheimer Society of Canada

20 Eglinton Avenue West, 16th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M4R 1K8

Tel: 416-488-8772 • 1-800-616-8816 • Fax: 416-322-6656

E-mail: [info@alzheimer.ca](mailto:info@alzheimer.ca) • Website: [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)

Facebook : [www.facebook.com/AlzheimerCanada](http://www.facebook.com/AlzheimerCanada) • Twitter : [www.twitter.com/AlzCanada](http://www.twitter.com/AlzCanada)

