

Cognition and Falls

Cognition and thinking ability

As you get older, it becomes increasingly important to take care of your mental health and well-being. Certain mental conditions are more common in older age e.g. dementia. Cognitive impairment is when a thinking or memory problem is greater than what would be expected for someone the same age with a similar level of education.

Examples of thinking problems or cognitive impairments are:

- Progressive and frequent memory problems
- Slower thinking and reactions
- Problem solving difficulties
- Difficulty focussing on tasks
- Difficulty learning new skills or difficulty in new situations
- Lack of drive/motivation to do things
- Changes in behaviour and personality
- Difficulty naming objects



Tip: Some medical conditions can have similar symptoms to dementia. Prompt medical diagnosis will help ensure that you receive the correct treatment and support.

Brain health

Engaging in mentally stimulating activities throughout life is associated with better cognitive function/thinking ability. Almost any type of mental activity could be beneficial, but the activities should be done regularly and involve new learning and be reasonably complex (e.g. learn a new language).

Physical activity throughout life can help prevent cognitive decline and dementia. Physical activity has other health benefits too e.g. cardiovascular.

Managing your heart health, particularly in midlife, can help reduce your risk of developing dementia. Conditions like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and obesity can increase your risk of developing dementia.

Be socially engaged. Being socially active may benefit your brain health too. Stay connected to family and friends, join a club or group or consider volunteering.

Mild cognitive impairment and dementia

Mild cognitive impairment is when someone reports thinking problems, has a thinking problem on assessment (e.g. memory problems) but can still perform everyday tasks independently. Compared to cognitively healthy older people, people with mild cognitive impairment are at an increased risk of developing dementia and falls.

Dementia is when impaired thinking ability and/or behaviour change affects an individual's ability to perform everyday tasks and function socially. There are different types of dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia) but often older people have more than one type – called mixed dementia. People with dementia are twice as likely to fall as people without dementia – more than 60% of community-dwelling people with dementia fall each year.

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Key points to remember:

- Cognitive impairment is when your thinking ability is worse than other people your age with similar levels of education
- There is a wide variety of thinking problems e.g. memory, problem solving and language problems
- If you are worried about your thinking ability, talk to your doctor – early medical diagnosis will ensure you get the right treatment and support
- Cognitive impairment and dementia increase your risk of falling
- There are steps you can take to reduce your risk of cognitive decline e.g. physical and social activities

What can I do right now?

- Manage your heart health and cardiovascular conditions, talk to your doctor for advice
- Learn a new skill or take up a new hobby
- Participate in hobbies and activities that involve using the mind and body together
- Join a club or group e.g. book club, to stay socially active
- Engage in physical activity and exercise, build up to 30 minutes most days of the week – talk to your doctor if you are just starting or have health conditions
- Find activities, such as a hobby or exercise, to relieve feelings of stress, anxiety or depression
- Eat a healthy diet that includes lots of vegetables
- Talk to your doctor or health professional if you have concerns about cognitive decline or depression

Tips: For more information about cognitive decline, mild cognitive impairment, dementia and managing your brain health talk to your doctor or health professional. You could also visit:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/>

<https://www.alz.org/>

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/searchresults?q=Dementia>

Disclaimer: This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your healthcare needs and how to prevent falls, you should seek advice from your health professional. This information was current at the time of development and is generalisable for people >60 years.