Fading memories: an absent mind or warning signs?

A doctor's appointment slips your mind, you can't remember the name of your newest colleague, or you've forgotten where you've left the keys for the umpteenth time…



Everyone has a memory lapse now and then. And while it's true that people tend to become gradually more forgetful as they age, there are certain signs of confusion or memory lapse that are cause for concern. The warning signs below could indicate the onset of dementia (of which Alzheimer's disease is the most common source) or the possibility of another physical cause such as stroke, depression or several other medical conditions. Seek out testing and diagnosis from a medical professional if you or a loved one:

Has trouble remembering entire events. It's one thing to forget small details like what you ate at an outing to a restaurant the day before last, but if you or a loved one has no recollection of ever making the trip at all, or who you met for lunch, it could be a sign of a more serious problem.

Has difficulty naming familiar objects or completing everyday tasks. It might not be that uncommon to forget the name of the species of your friend's exotic pet parakeet. Those with dementia or other conditions, however, are sometimes unable to recall everyday words like "toaster" or "book," or may, for example, look at a key and not recall how to unlock a door.

Misplaces common items in unusual places. Finding the car keys in the refrigerator or the iron in the oven are actions that should signal some alarm bells.

Tells the same story over and over. Many people are guilty of this one, but if you or a loved one tells the same story word for word, without an inkling that the tale may have been told before, or within a brief time span (e.g., within the hour), it may be time to look for additional support.

Loses the way in a familiar neighbourhood or area. Suddenly feeling confused or like you have no idea where you are can be unsettling at the best of times. But it becomes a real concern when that feeling overcomes the person in a place they've been to many times before and should have no difficulty navigating.

Lets personal care slide. Common trouble signs include not bathing, wearing the same clothes over and over, an unusually messy house and not eating well. Often the person in trouble will insist they have bathed or eaten when this is clearly not the case.

Is extremely moody or seems to have undergone a complete personality change. Everyone experiences ups and downs and life and expresses themselves differently. When a normally upbeat person becomes cantankerous and aggressive, however, or a usually social individual suddenly turns into a recluse, there is definitely cause for concern.

Behaves strangely. If frugal Aunt Betty suddenly buys an extravagant necklace, or you catch your father wearing a parka in the summer heat, there's a possibility that these are signs of a more serious issue.

Has trouble with more complex thinking. Symptoms of this can include: difficulty following directions or doing basic math, such as paying the bills or balancing a chequebook.

In our fast-paced, ultra-busy world, where we rely on cell phones for phone numbers and personal device alarms to remind us about meetings, it's not surprising that (despite all this technology) many of us still miss doctor's appointments or spend 30 minutes looking for that misplaced hydro bill. And while it's easy to chalk up forgetfulness to overload or getting older, there are some signals that cannot be overlooked or ignored.

Though you may want to gloss over these warning signs, it's important to 'trust your gut.' If any of the symptoms listed above sound familiar, it's definitely time to contact a health professional to uncover if any medical conditions, such as dementia, are a root cause. If the symptoms are nothing to worry about, you'll undoubtedly feel relief. But if a more serious situation is revealed, you and your loved ones will gain peace of mind in knowing that an early diagnosis usually means better odds of treatment and management for memory-related illnesses such as dementia.