

Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)

What is MCI?

Memory loss is widely thought of as a normal process of aging. Word finding difficulty, misplacing items, and general forgetfulness are commonly dismissed as “senior moments”. However, memory research conducted over the past few decades has revealed that mild memory impairment or general forgetfulness is not always normal, and in fact, may be the result of Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI).

MCI is a relatively new term that has become more widely understood over the past decade. A person with MCI often demonstrates subtle or mild memory impairment, which is often apparent to the individual with MCI and those that are close to them. Memory concerns voiced by MCI patients often include difficulty with remembering names, trouble recalling recent conversations, misplacing items, and increased forgetfulness. While subtle-to-mild memory loss is present in the individual with MCI, this person is typically able to care for him/herself and will function normally in every other aspect of their life. For example, a person with MCI may very well be able to drive, manage his/her finances and medications, and continue to live independently. Therefore, because the individual with MCI functions mostly within normal limits, those around them may discount their memory problems as simply being normal age related changes.

MCI Types

Amnestic, MCI – Amnestic MCI occurs only when memory loss is apparent both subjectively from the person with MCI and/or family member and objectively on formal memory testing. As noted above, all other aspects of function are typically within normal limits including hygiene and managing daily affairs.

Multi-Domain, MCI – Multi-domain MCI may present with slight memory impairment, but there will also be evidence of subtle-to-mild cognitive disturbance across other areas such as language, visual perceptual skills, or reasoning/judgment.

Single Non-Memory Domain MCI – This occurs when the person has a focal cognitive impairment in an area other than memory. For example, a person may be having significant difficulty with language, while all other aspects of cognition is normal.

How does MCI differ from normal aging?

Compared with the large body of information available on Alzheimer's disease, research on MCI is still in its early stages. Therefore, it can be very difficult to differentiate MCI from normal aging during the process of a routine doctor visit or from solely observing the person at home. While neuroimaging research has begun to examine this question to see if certain brain structures change with MCI, there is still a lot of research to be done in this area. Neuropsychological tests are also frequently used to better examine a person's memory and can be very helpful in differentiating MCI from normal aging.

Does MCI increase ones risk of developing dementia?

As noted above, some research has supported that a diagnosis of MCI can increase a persons risk of developing dementia. Researchers at Mayo Clinic found that Amnestic MCI patients in their study progressed to Alzheimer's disease at a rate of 12% per year. This increased risk is significant when considering the normal controls in the Mayo Clinic research sample developed Alzheimer's disease at a rate of only 1% to 2% per year. The risk of conversion to dementia for patients with Multi-domain MCI and Single Non-Memory Domain MCI is not as clearly understood at this time. While Multi-domain MCI can sometimes occur with normal aging, it can also increase one's risk of converting to Alzheimer's disease and/or dementia related to cerebrovascular disease (Vascular dementia). Single-Non Memory MCI can increase one's risk of developing Vascular dementia, language disorders, dementia with Lewy bodies, and Frontotemporal dementia.

Is there any treatment available for MCI?

There is currently no specific treatment for MCI. Studies are in progress to investigate the usefulness of treatments for Alzheimer's disease with MCI patients. Early data has shown some promise in treating Amnestic MCI with medication used for Alzheimer's disease. This treatment may help to slow further progression of memory loss and delay the onset of dementia. Therefore, it is very important that individuals that are experiencing changes in memory be evaluated early and allow a medical professional to determine whether memory changes are normal for age or perhaps the result of MCI.

For further information, or if you would like to schedule an appointment with The Memory Center, please feel free to contact us at the address and phone number listed below.

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