



# Memory loss: Don't panic but do get it checked out

BY DR LIZ FALKNER  
Masterton Medical

ALZHEIMER'S Disease is only one of many causes of dementia — and many causes of memory loss can be helped and some completely cured.

If you are worried about yourself or someone else, it is essential to face the problem and have it thoroughly checked out, remembering that it is completely normal to become more forgetful with age.

Having a panic about where you've parked the car doesn't mean you're getting Alzheimer's. Neither does temporarily forgetting names, nor having a word "on the tip of your tongue". Older people usually need to note down reminders.

Interestingly, most people with dementia don't realise there may be a problem. It's their relatives who come to the doctor.

"Dementia" basically means progressive loss of the brain functions to do with thinking.

As well as memory loss, dementia includes deterioration in language, naming people and objects, loss of abstract thinking

and hence planning and usually personality change.

If a person is sometimes alert but sometimes "away with the fairies", it is probably not dementia. The simplest common cause is a urinary tract infection — easy to treat — and for which there may be no other symptoms.

Side-effects of medication are very common in the elderly. Ordinary doses of medication can build up to toxic levels, especially with poor kidney function, and drug interactions are common with the chance of a drug interaction multiplying according to the number of different medications taken.

Depression can look a lot like dementia and is very common in the elderly.

It disturbs sleep, causing constant tiredness and so wrecks concentration. If a conversation passes in a blur, of course it won't be remembered.

Loss of interest in food and people, especially if personal cares slip, can make depression mimic dementia.

However, with depression the sufferer is all too aware of their deterioration.

Fixing depression can be transforming.

Many elderly become more sensitive to alcohol. They lose muscle bulk, often eat less, and alcohol is broken down more slowly. Alcohol also interacts with some medications.

Easily treatable causes of dementia include:

- Thyroid deficiency or vitamin B12 deficiency
- Toxic carbon dioxide build-up due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Raised calcium levels caused by some cancers
- Multiple tiny strokes that can happen silently, damage the brain. The effects can't be reversed but their frequency can be greatly reduced.

Always, always, investigate memory loss.

■ Useful references: Alzheimer's New Zealand: Go to [www.alzheimers.org.nz](http://www.alzheimers.org.nz)  
The website of the Royal College of Physicians of England, designed for both patients and health professionals, is easy to access and utterly reliable. Go to [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)