

Could I Have Alzheimer's Disease at My Age?

It used to be that if you forgot a celebrity's name, you'd Google it and move on. But with the *Still Alice* spotlight on early-onset Alzheimer's disease, which strikes before age 65, every blanked word and mislaid phone can inspire nervous panic. Most midlife forgetfulness is, fortunately, just that. Here's a guide:

You can't remember a name 10 seconds after you're introduced.

Don't worry. Names tend to hop right in and out of working memory, where immediate info is stored, when you're not focusing or are meeting a lot of people. Also, names are arbitrary words that are disconnected from meaning, making them harder to retain.

More worrisome: Not remembering having been introduced. Alzheimer's disease erodes the ability to form and retain new memories.

You lose your keys.

Don't worry. We all misplace stuff sometimes. (What helps: Put 'em in the same place every time.)

More worrisome: When the keys turn up in odd places, like the refrigerator or trash can, or you leave them in the ignition with the car running. People with dementia are also less able to retrace their steps to find items — and may forget what they're looking for.

You can't retrieve a word that's on the tip of your tongue.

Don't worry. Blame "blockers," words that sound similar and sidetrack your brain. Trying to say rhinoceros, you get stuck on hippopotamus or triceratops. Usually, though, the right word comes to you later.

More worrisome: Inventing words, like horn-cow for rhino, especially for everyday words like cat or toothbrush. Or not organizing words into logical sentences: "I mouth-brushed clean mouth."

You have no idea why you entered a room.

Don't worry. This lapse can hit anyone who's distracted, multi-tasking, stressed or nervous.

More worrisome: Increasing lapses, or difficulty concentrating and following directions. People with Alzheimer's disease develop trouble following a recipe, reading, writing or learning to use a new gadget.

You paid a bill twice.

Don't worry. Disorganization happens. Random screw-ups are normal.

More worrisome: Constant mistakes, unpaid bills, checkbook errors, trouble making change in a store or not knowing the month or year when you write a check. Problems with money and finances often show up before memory loss.

You get lost while driving.

Don't worry. It's no big deal, especially if you're going somewhere new or have a lousy sense of direction.

More worrisome: Getting lost on familiar routes or blanking on where you're headed. An uptick in fender-benders is also a red flag.

Your best reality check.

Family and friends tend to spot warning signs of Alzheimer's disease first — and even more reliably than cognitive screening tests, according to a 2010 Washington University School of Medicine study. They are the best at seeing patterns of odd mistakes and telltale personality changes, such as anxiety and withdrawal. When in doubt, check with your doctor.

Depression, medications, insomnia and the stress of excessive worry — which can cause symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease — are reversible. And, there's hopeful news: Researchers continue to make discoveries that provide insights into Alzheimer's disease and investigate new drug treatments for the disease.

By Paula Spencer Scott, the author of Surviving Alzheimer's: Practical Tips and Soul-Saving Wisdom for Caregivers