

Medical Evaluation of Memory Loss

The first step in getting help for a memory problem is to have a thorough medical evaluation. Treatable conditions that affect memory can be found during such evaluations, and if such a condition is identified, treatment can begin immediately. These conditions include depression and the side effects of certain prescription drugs.

The evaluation of the memory problem will focus on 3 questions:

Is It an Important Memory Disorder?

The evaluation will test the functioning of the mind in a number of areas. This will help the doctor establish the importance of the memory changes.

Can the Memory Problem Be Improved?

Medical evaluation and testing may find conditions or medicines that affect memory. If these are the cause of the memory changes, the doctor will suggest ways to correct the condition or changes in medication to avoid side effects.

What Is the Cause of the Memory Problem?

More than 100 different diseases can cause serious memory loss. However, only a few of them account for more than 90% of all cases of dementia. The doctor will gather enough information to identify the most likely cause of the person's memory problem.

What types of Specialists are There?

Three types of specialists can help with evaluating and managing memory problems. After completing the medical evaluation, the doctor will determine which other professionals might be of help in evaluating or managing a person's memory problem.

What types of Specialists are There?

Neurologists

Neurologists are medical doctors who specialize in diseases of the brain and nervous system. They have broad experience in these diseases and understand the unusual causes of memory loss. They are the experts in the “differential diagnosis” of memory loss, that is, determining what from a list of possible causes applies to a specific person and which cause is the most likely.

Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in the disorders of mental function and emotion. Those with special training or interest in older persons are experts in the management of the mental complications of memory disorders. Depression, behavioral problems, and severe confusion often interfere with an affected person's best functioning level. They can also affect the family. Depression is also a common cause of memory problems.

Neuro-Psychologists

Neuropsychologists are experts in the measurement of mental function. They test brain functioning in many areas and offer the most precise answers to questions about the nature and seriousness of mental changes during the early stages of memory loss or dementia. Neuropsychologists can provide information to doctor's on a person's pattern of mental changes, which can be useful in determining the cause, particularly in difficult or unusual cases.

What Does a Memory Loss Evaluation Include?

A memory loss evaluation may include:

- A thorough history and examination
- Laboratory tests to find hidden causes of memory loss
- A brain imaging study (a CAT or CT scan, or an MRI scan)

**What Does a
Memory Loss
Evaluation
Include?
continued**

Brain Imaging in Memory Loss

The doctor may recommend that the person with a memory problem have an image made of the brain. Such pictures of the brain have two uses:

- To see whether one of several rare causes of memory loss is the cause of the problem. These conditions include brain hemorrhage (bleeding), brain tumors, and hydrocephalus (“water on the brain”), among others.
- To help determine a likely cause of the memory loss. For example, atrophy (shrinkage of the brain) and vascular damage from strokes can be seen in the images.

Two similar technologies are used for getting images of the brain.

Computed Tomography

(CT) scanning is an X-ray method that gives the doctors a series of images that show “slices” of the entire brain. CT scans allow the doctors to detect strokes, tumors, and other uncommon causes of memory loss. A CT scan of the brain takes about 10 minutes.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging

(MRI) is another method of getting similar pictures, except that it provides more detailed images and is especially helpful in identifying the amount of vascular (blood vessels) disease in the brain. The disadvantages of an MRI scan are that it takes longer than a CT scan, about 20 minutes, it often requires the patient to pass through a small enclosed space, and it costs more than a CT scan.

Medicare covers most of the cost of imaging, as well as most X-rays.