PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Improving Your Memory

This information gives tips to help you improve your memory.

Pay attention

Paying close attention can help you remember things. For example, focus when you meet someone new. Repeat the person's name out loud or to yourself. Try to connect the person's name with something about the person that stands out (such as "elegant Ellen" or "tall Tom"). You can also try introducing that person to someone else.

Use mnemonics

A mnemonic (new-mon-ik) is a way that you help yourself remember information. The following are examples of mnemonics:

- To remember that the word dessert has 2 s's, you can think that most people want 2 servings of dessert.
- To spell luggage, connect it with the phrase "Get a good grip on your luggage."
- To remember the number of days in a month, connect it with the rhyme "30 days hath September, April, June, and November."

Another tip to help you remember things is by using the first letter of each word in a phrase. This is called an acronym. A commonly used acronym is TGIF for "thank goodness it's Friday."

With practice, you will be able to use your own mnemonics to remember things that are important to you.

Chunk numbers

Do you forget a phone number by the time you cross the room to dial it? Try chunking a few numbers together into smaller groups. For example, it's easier to remember 725 and 3591 than 7253591.

Picture things in Your mind

If you can't find something you're looking for, picture in your mind what you were doing when you last remember having the item.

For example, if you know you had your briefcase with you when you came into the house but can't remember where you put it, you could think, "I came into the house, hung up my coat, and started to go through the mail." Ask yourself the following questions: Did I put it in the closet when I hung up my coat? Did I put it in the room where I looked at the mail?

Start making routines

Doing the same thing every time can help you remember. For example:

- Always keep your keys in one place. If you decide to keep your keys in the kitchen, put them in a specific location in the kitchen.
- Do chores in the same order every day. For example, always put yesterday's newspapers in the recycle bin on your way out first thing in the morning.
- Keep a list of household things you run out of and always add to it as you use the last of something. This way you will have a list when you go to the grocery store.
- Write the location of your car on the parking lot ticket or connect the level and aisle with something familiar (for example, level 3 = 3 grandchildren or aisle b = Boston).

If you always do these things, they will become habit and you won't have to remember them.

Review things beforehand

If you will be going to a social event and you're worried you won't remember the names of people you've already met, ask the host or hostess for the guest list. Picture in your mind the people who will be going. If you're not sure what someone looks like, ask the host or hostess. For example, you could ask, "Is Shelly your friend who has red hair?"

Challenge your mind

Over time, challenging your mind will improve your memory and your ability to think and concentrate. Take up a new hobby or learn a new skill. Doing crossword puzzles, solving Sudoku puzzles, or playing a board game like Scrabble® can stimulate your memory and improve your attention span. A challenging activity can also be naming as many animals or states as you can in 1 minute.

Write things down

Keep a calendar with all your appointments and social engagements. For example, use your phone or computer to remind yourself about appointments or important dates.

Writing daily lists or keeping a notebook with daily reminders and notes is another helpful strategy. For example, write down the name of the book a friend recommended or make a list of chores and errands to do today, tomorrow, and over the weekend. Writing down daily goals or intentions can be useful for keeping your focus for the day.

Review your diet

Are you eating a balanced diet? Keep a record of what you eat for about a week and ask your healthcare provider to review it with you. You may not be getting enough protein, vitamins, or minerals.

Limit the amount of alcohol you drink

Alcohol can affect your short-term memory. Ask your healthcare provider if the amount of alcohol you drink could have an effect on your memory. If you find that you don't remember what happened after you have some drinks, try to limit the number of drinks you have.

Get enough sleep

Ask your healthcare provider about taking a sleeping pill if you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep. Start having a nighttime routine so that your body gets used to sleeping around the same time every night.

Review your medicines

Some medicines can make you forget things. Ask your pharmacist or other healthcare provider if any of the medicines you take can affect your memory. You can also look up your medicines on the Internet.

If it's hard to remember when to take your medicines, use a pillbox to organize your pills for each day of the week.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Improving Your Memory - Last updated on July 16, 2026
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center