

Spotlight on Health

Testing Brain Health

Some seniors may have a harder time finding the right word than they did when they were young. Some might find learning new things a little more difficult. They might get more easily sidetracked when doing things. This is because aging can affect parts of the brain that control memory, learning, and attention.

Some of these changes are normal but some are not. Changes in the brain that impact daily life are not normal. Often forgetting to pay bills or take medicines may mean that brain health is declining. Some things that change brain health for the worse can be treated. If treatment is a success, brain health may go back to normal.¹ Treatment of other things, like Alzheimer disease, does not improve brain health.

In this month's Spotlight on Health, we talk about testing for brain health. We also discuss what can be done if brain health is declining.

How Do You Measure Brain Health?

To find out if there are problems with brain health, doctors may just talk to their patients and observe how they respond. They may also ask the patient's loved ones if they have any concerns. The problem with this approach is that it is subjective.

An objective way is for doctors to use tests. Just as weight and blood pressure measure general health, there are tests that measure brain health. These tests may be performed during annual wellness visits and may be covered by Medicare.²

There are many tests for brain health. The one Quest Diagnostics offers is called CogniSense™. CogniSense is an iPad®-based test that takes about 10 minutes. It consists of:

- Listening to and remembering 3 words
- Saying the current date, season, and day of the week
- Drawing a clock and filling in the numbers and the time
- Showing a specific time by drawing in the hands of the clock
- Naming 8 pictures of household items and remembering them later in the test

The test can let the doctor know if there may be mild memory problems or dementia. It can be repeated later to find out if brain health is getting better or worse.

What if Test Results Suggest a Decline in Brain Health?

If test results suggest dementia or a decline in brain health, the doctor will look for a cause. Some causes of dementia can be treated (see sidebar). If that's the case, signs of dementia may go away after treatment.



Causes of Dementia That Can Be Treated³

- Some types of medicines
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Not enough folate or vitamin B12 in the diet
- High and low blood sugar
- Not making enough thyroid hormone
- Too much fluid in the brain (caused by an infection, head injury, tumor, or stroke)
- Depression
- Blood that collects between the brain and its outer covering
- Problems with kidney, liver, and/or lung

Some types of dementia can't be cured (see sidebar). Patients can still be helped by a diagnosis, though. A diagnosis can help patients to⁴:

- Understand why they are having problems
- Give directions now about how to manage future financial, legal, and healthcare matters
- Take steps now to prevent use of dangerous tools or driving when the dementia gets worse
- Get help from groups that deal with dementia
- Join in activities organized by these groups
- Try one or more drugs that might help lessen symptoms
- Sign up to try drugs in experimental trials

Diagnosis of a loved one can help caregivers⁴:

- Get trained on managing people with dementia
- Plan to manage their personal health and stress while giving care
- Make sure their loved one takes all needed medicines

How Quest Can Help

Quest provides the CogniSense test mentioned above. It's an objective test for brain health. Unlike most subjective tests, it directly measures brain function. Since it is an iPad-based test, doctors can easily upload results to a patient's electronic health record. This helps the doctor track a patient's progress over time.

Additional Information

Brain Health As You Age: ACL.gov/Get_Help/BrainHealth/

Types of Dementia That Can't Be Cured³

- Alzheimer disease
- Vascular dementia caused by multiple small strokes
- Frontotemporal dementia (including Pick disease)
- Lewy body dementia
- AIDS dementia complex
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob "mad cow" disease
- Huntington disease
- Parkinson disease

References

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3. Alzheimer's Association. 2016 Alzheimer's disease facts and figures. *Alzheimers Dement*. 2016;12:459-509.
4. The Gerontological Society of America Workgroup on Cognitive Impairment and Earlier Diagnosis. Report and recommendations. [geron.org/images/gsa/documents/gsaciworkgroup2015report.pdf](http://www.geron.org/images/gsa/documents/gsaciworkgroup2015report.pdf). Published 2015. Accessed September 28, 2016.