When you notice memory loss, it’s time to talk

Talking about memory loss with a family member may feel uncomfortable. But it’s important to talk about your — or your loved one’s — changing abilities to remember or think. Starting that conversation could be one of the best things you can do for your family.

Sometimes memory loss is a sign of a health problem, such as dementia or another condition, that should be addressed as soon as possible. When families work together to get care and support early on, you have more options for staying healthy.

Getting your memory checked is a normal part of overall health care, like getting checked for high blood pressure or diabetes. But for many people, rais­ing the topic is the hardest part. Here are some tips for talking with a loved one about memory loss.

If you notice signs of memory loss in yourself:

* **Plan what you want to say.** Make notes ahead of time, if that helps you stay focused. Pick a time when you’re not rushed and a setting that’s calm, quiet and private.
* **Accept their support.** Ask your family member to work together with you to agree on your next steps.
* **Make an appointment with your health care provider.** Your provider should do tests to determine the degree of memory loss and to find the cause. Your doctor also should ask a lot of questions. Take a family member or friend along to help answer the doctor’s questions based on their own observations.

If a loved one is experiencing memory loss:

* **Choose the right place and time** for your conversation — a quiet, private spot when neither of you will feel rushed.
* **Plan what to say** for a respectful, productive conversation. Rather than telling them what to do, let them know why you’re concerned. Give them examples of changes you’ve noticed, without sounding judgmental.
* **Listen carefully.** Ask about their thoughts and observations.
* **Reassure them.** Some memory changes may indicate dementia, but not always. Some memory loss is caused by treatable or reversible conditions.
* **Ask your loved one to have a medical check-up,** if they don’t already have a doctor’s visit on the calendar. It’s important to know the cause of their memory loss and whether it can be treated or reversed. Plan to go with them to their visit.
* **Focus on the positive.** Talk with your loved one about a visit to their health care provider as a way to help them stay healthier for longer and possibly to get support for them and for your family. Remind them the goal is to understand what’s causing their memory loss — and to make things better.

If you or your family member needs help finding a doctor, contact:

* Sea Mar Community Health Clinics at (855) 289-4503 or seamar.org.
* Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic at yvfwc.com.

You also can talk with a care consultant at the Alzheimer’s Association, Washington State Chapter:

 ▪ Estela Ochoa, (206) 529-3877 or eochoa@alz.org.

 ▪ Maria Anakotta, (206) 529-3892 ormanakotta@alz.org.

You also can visit doh.wa.gov/memory to learn about some differences between normal aging and signs of memory loss that may be dementia-related. But the most important thing to know is: Don’t wait — early detection makes a big difference.