



Assessing Cognitive Impairment in Older Patients

A Guide for Primary Care Physicians

As a primary care practice, you and your staff are often the first to address a patient's complaints - or a family's concerns - about memory loss or possible dementia.

This quick guide addresses:

- ✓ **Why** is early screening for cognitive impairment in older adults important?
- ✓ **When** is screening indicated?
- ✓ **How** can physicians and staff find time for screening?
- ✓ **How** is cognitive impairment further evaluated?

Benefit of Early Screening

- ✓ **If screening is negative:** Concerns may be alleviated, at least at that point in time.
- ✓ **If screening is positive and further evaluation is warranted:** The patient and physician can take the next step of identifying the cause of impairment. Rule out treatable, reversible causes such as medication side effects, metabolic and/or endocrine disease, psychiatric disorder, or sleep disorder.

When is screening indicated?

- ✓ Patients should be screened for cognitive impairment if:
 - **The person, family members, or others express concerns** about changes in his or her memory or thinking
 - **You observe problems/changes** in the patient's memory or thinking
 - The patient is **age 65 or older**
- ✓ Refer to a specialist if needed, particularly for:
 - Further clarification of the diagnosis
 - Management recommendations
 - Medically complicated patients
 - Or for patients under the age of 65

How is cognitive impairment evaluated?

- ✓ Physicians and trained staff can use brief screening tools such as **The MMSE, Mini-Cog, AD8, and MoCA**
- ✓ Please visit: www.nia.nih.gov/research/cognitive-instrument for a searchable database of instruments used to detect cognitive impairment in older adults. A positive screening indicates the patient requires further evaluation which can be conducted by the primary care provider. Some items to consider:

- **Detailed history** from a person who has frequent contact with the patient, such as a spouse or other care provider, is the best way to more fully assess cognitive impairment. Interviews to assess memory, behavior, mood, and functional status (especially complex actions such as driving and managing money) are best conducted independently with the caregiver and patient.
- **A thorough medical and neurological exam** to rule out the possibility that a medical illness or other reversible condition is the explanation for the cognitive changes.
- **A basic workup** (labs such as CBC, UA, CMP) to rule out treatable, reversible causes including thyroid disease, Vitamin B12 deficiency and **brain scan (preferably non-contrast MRI)**.
- Genetic testing and biomarker testing are **not** recommended for clinical use at this time. These tests are primarily conducted in research settings.

More Information

National Institute on Aging (NIA)

www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/assessing-cognitive-impairment-older-adults.

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

1-800-438-4380 (toll-free)

adear@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

Illinois Memory and Aging Specialty Clinics

Advocate Memory Center: www.advocatehealth.com/memorycenter

Alexian Brothers Memory & Cognitive Disorders Center:

www.alexianbrothershealth.org/neurosciences/services/memory-disorder

Northshore University Neurological Institute:

northshore.org/neurological-institute/centers-and-programs/alzheimers-disease-and-memory-disorders-program/

Northwestern Medicine Neurobehavior and Memory Clinic: www.brain.nm.org

Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital:

www.cadencehealth.org/what-we-offer/specialized-care/neurosciences/dementia#locations

Rush Memory Clinic: www.rush.edu/memory-clinic

SIU School of Medicine Memory and Aging Clinic: www.siumed.edu/alz

University of Chicago Center for Comprehensive Care and Research on Memory Disorders:

<http://www.uchospitals.edu/specialties/neurosciences/memory/>

UIC Memory and Aging Clinic:

http://chicago.medicine.uic.edu/departments_programs/departments/neurology/patient_care_neurology/memory_aging_clinic