

## Screening for Cognitive Impairment in Older Adults

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) has issued a **final** recommendation statement on *Screening for Cognitive Impairment in Older Adults*.

This final recommendation statement applies to adults older than age 65 who do not have recognized signs or symptoms of cognitive impairment. Those who are having problems with memory or thinking should talk to their doctor or nurse.

The final recommendation statement summarizes what the Task Force learned about the potential benefits and harms of screening for cognitive impairment: Currently, there is not enough evidence

to make a recommendation for or against screening all older adults for cognitive impairment.

The Task Force recognizes that cognitive impairment is a serious public health problem. It encourages health care professionals to be alert to early signs of cognitive impairment and to follow up with patients who have symptoms or concerns. It also urges more research on screening for, and treatment of, this health problem.

This fact sheet explains this recommendation and what it might mean for you.

### What is cognitive impairment?

**Cognitive impairment is a disorder that causes a person to have problems with memory or other mental activities, like learning, organizing, and making decisions. It includes a range of conditions from mild cognitive impairment to severe dementia. Alzheimer's disease is one type of cognitive impairment.**

### Facts About Cognitive Impairment

Cognitive impairment includes many disorders that affect millions of older Americans. It ranges from mild cognitive impairment to severe dementia. Alzheimer's is one type of cognitive impairment that begins as mild memory problems and progresses to severe dementia.

The main risk factor for cognitive impairment is getting older. Other risk factors include diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, tobacco use, alcohol use, depression, and diet and exercise.

Mild cognitive impairment involves memory problems that are greater than normal but that don't interfere with a person's ability to carry out usual daily activities. Symptoms of mild cognitive impairment are difficult to detect because they do not interfere with daily life activities.

Dementia is much more serious. It is the loss of thinking, remembering, and reasoning skills to the point where it becomes difficult for a person to carry out life tasks and activities like bathing or dressing oneself. People with dementia also may have behavioral and psychological problems. About 2.4 to 5.5 million Americans have dementia.

## Screening for Cognitive Impairment

Screening is usually done by asking patients a series of questions and having them perform several tasks that measure memory, language skills, attention, decision-making, and other mental functions.

### Potential Benefits and Harms

The Task Force reviewed studies on screening for cognitive impairment. It found that there was not enough evidence to determine whether screening all older adults would be beneficial. It therefore could not recommend for or against this screening.

The Task Force did find that some screening tools can successfully identify people who have early stage dementia. However, the Task Force found no evidence on whether early detection helps patients, caregivers, and doctors make decisions about health care or plan for the future.

The Task Force found very little evidence about potential harms of screening for cognitive impairment and dementia.

The Task Force looked at the benefits and harms of drug treatments for cognitive impairment. They found that several can have a small, short-term benefit. However, these drugs can have some side effects, including dizziness, weakness, problems sleeping, slow heartbeat, and upset stomach.

The Task Force also found that some programs for caregivers (for example, family members caring for people with dementia) can help to reduce burden and depression in a small way. The long-term benefits of these treatments and programs are uncertain.

The Task Force recognizes that more research is urgently needed on how early detection of cognitive impairment and dementia can help older adults, their families, and their health care professionals make decisions about health care and plan for the future.

## The Final Recommendation on Screening for Cognitive Impairment in Older Adults: What Does It Mean?

Here is the Task Force's final recommendation on screening for cognitive impairment in older adults. It is based on the quality and strength of the evidence about the potential benefits and harms of screening for this purpose. It also is based on the size of the potential benefits and harms. Task Force recommendation grades are explained in the box at the end of this fact sheet.

When there is not enough evidence to judge benefits and harms, the Task Force does not make a recommendation for or against—it issues an **I Statement**. The Notes explain key ideas.

Visit the Task Force Web site to read the full **final recommendation statement**. The statement explains the evidence the Task Force reviewed and how it decided on the grade. An **evidence report** provides more detail about the studies the Task Force reviewed.

**1** The Task Force concludes that the *current evidence is insufficient* to assess the balance of benefits and harms of *screening* for cognitive impairment. **I Statement**

**Notes**

**1** *current evidence is insufficient*  
 The Task Force did not find enough information in the studies to determine the overall benefits and harms of screening in older adults.

*screening*  
 Brief questionnaire-like tests that measure memory and how well a person is doing with other mental functions like attention, decision-making, and language.

**Talking to Your Doctor about Cognitive Impairment**

Acknowledging thinking and memory problems can sometimes be a difficult thing. However, if you have been experiencing these problems, or a family member has mentioned them, you may want to see your doctor or nurse to discuss these concerns. He or she can talk with you about possible next steps to evaluate your signs or symptoms. During this conversation, have all your questions answered and concerns addressed. Think about your personal beliefs and preferences for health care and consider scientific recommendations, like this one from the Task Force. Use this information to become fully informed and decide what actions might be right for you.




**What is the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force?**

The Task Force is an independent group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. The Task Force works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, or preventive medicines. The recommendations apply to people with no signs or symptoms of the disease being discussed.

To develop a recommendation statement, Task Force members consider the best available science and research on a topic. For each topic, the Task Force posts draft documents for public comment, including a draft recommendation statement. All comments are reviewed and considered in developing the **final recommendation statement**. To learn more, visit the **Task Force Web site**.

USPSTF Recommendation Grades	
Grade	Definition
A	Recommended.
B	Recommended.
C	Recommendation depends on the patient's situation.
D	Not recommended.
I statement	There is not enough evidence to make a recommendation.

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