

Our Health

How Black Americans Can Protect Their Cognitive Ability

by Heidi Schwarzwald, MD

(NAPS)—Throughout my career as a clinician, I have experienced firsthand the concerns and challenges that cognitive issues cause older adults. They fear they'll lose their memory and their independence, and become a burden to their loved ones. The questions they ask most often are if their "forgetfulness" is just natural aging, or if they're developing a form of dementia. They are often scared of the answer because they think there is little they can do about it.

Even though there is no cure for dementia, if you or a loved one are tested and diagnosed early, there are treatments that can slow down disease progression. These treatments can help you protect your cognitive function and potentially add years to your memory and ability to live independently.

The key is early screening and diagnosis, but sadly, far too many older adults need testing. In fact, according to research published in Alzheimer's Research & Therapy, 92% of older Americans living with mild cognitive impairment (MCI), a common predecessor to dementia, are estimated to be undiagnosed. Similarly, the Alzheimer's Association reports 54% of adults aged 45 and older who believe they have cognitive decline, have not talked with their health care professional to get tested. This gap is a huge concern since diagnosed cognitive issues can be managed to help reduce the disease's progression. Without care planning, older adults with MCI have an increased chance of hospitalizations, among other risks, resulting in higher costs to families.

Individuals with MCI and those around them may be aware that memory or mental function is declining. Oftentimes these subtle changes may seem insignificant, so they do not discuss it with their primary care provider who could recommend early interventions that would make the most impact.

Some important red flags to look out for when considering if mental decline goes beyond the typical forgetfulness that comes with age are:

1. Missed appointments and social events
2. Consistently losing train of thought and inability to follow the plot of a book or movie
3. Trouble following a conversation
4. Difficulty taking medicine due to confusion or lack of dexterity
5. Falls
6. Difficulty making decisions, finishing a task, or following instructions



Early testing is key when it comes to reducing Black Americans' risk for dementia.

7. Issues finding a way around familiar places

If you or an aging loved one is experiencing these potential warning signs, do not ignore them. Take action and get tested as early as possible. If you are diagnosed with MCI, you can determine your management options and start them early to help you stay independent for as long as possible.

Testing can be easy and convenient.

Digital cognitive testing, which leverages technology for a more accurate diagnosis, is one of the most efficient and effective methods to identify and address cognitive issues early. These tests, which can be completed in less than ten minutes, are offered to eligible health plan members as a part of Signify Health's In-Home Health Evaluations (IHEs), a visit covered under many health plans at no additional cost to the member.

As part of the IHE, clinicians administer the digital cognitive test in the members' homes where they are often more comfortable than in an office setting. The clinicians also discuss any concerns and fears a member may have regarding the sensitive topic of cognitive decline. Once the test is completed, the results are shared with the member's health plan and their primary care provider to help facilitate care planning and develop a treatment plan so health plan members get the support and resources they need.

By catching cognitive health issues early, older adults can get ahead of the disease progression and start treatment that may help reduce future caregiving challenges and concerns. Additionally, early detection gives members and their caregivers extra time to learn more about cognitive decline so they can actively engage in making decisions about their future health care and daily living support needs.

If you or a loved one is interested in exploring digital cognitive testing, visit the self-scheduling portal at HelloSignify.com. to see if you're eligible for an IHE.