



FACT SHEET

Cognitive Problems following Neurological Illness

Neurological illnesses, accidents or surgery to the brain, can affect the way a person remembers, attends, concentrates or thinks clearly. Together with a number of other mental skills, these are commonly referred to as 'cognitive abilities'.

Cognitive Abilities – some examples

- 1: Difficulties with memory
- 2: Problem solving
- 3: Visual perceptual problems
- 4: Speed of information processing
- 5: Verbal skills
- 6: Organisational abilities

The brain and cognitive abilities

Different parts of the brain contribute to different types of cognition. So, changes in one part of the brain may result in a just one particular type of cognitive difficulty. Cognitive changes may also range from quite minor or subtle changes, to fairly global or widespread changes affecting several aspects of cognition. Some patients experience cognitive problems before a neurological diagnosis is confirmed. Others notice cognitive problems following accidents, medical or surgical procedures, which can affect the structure or function of the brain. However, in many cases cognitive abilities may not be affected at all. So, in the same way as physical changes can affect an individuals differently, so too can cognitive changes.

People are not always aware of cognitive problems indeed it may be health care staff, teachers or employers who first notice changes.



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Examples of Cognitive Problems

- Forgetting names of people, places, appointments, where you put things, or things you plan to do.
- Finding it hard to concentrate, getting easily distracted, or having difficulty keeping more than one thing in your mind.
- Finding it hard to make decisions, or showing poor judgment.
- Having trouble following conversation, especially if more than one person is speaking.
- Loosing the thread of what you are saying mid-way through a conversation, or forgetting which word you were going to use.
- Finding it takes you longer to understand things, or make decisions.
- Getting lost in familiar routes or places, finding things difficult to identify or having trouble judging distances or speed.
- Difficulties with tasks usually performed well at home, school or work.

If you experience any difficulties with cognitive abilities you should speak to your doctor. He or she can then refer you for further assessment with a clinical neuropsychologist, or occupational therapist. An assessment can clarify particular strengths and weaknesses and how these might affect performance at home, school or work. The assessment process sometimes is also used to help diagnose a neurological problem. Assessments are sometimes repeated to monitor change and recovery over time. For example, some patients are assessed before and after surgery to see what improvements have taken place.

Cognitive difficulties can, in many cases, be well managed by appropriately designed strategies or more formal rehabilitation. Your teacher or employer may need to know if you have cognitive problems so that they can consider ways in which they can help you. Driving skills may also be affected. For further information speak to a member of your health care team.