MADISON NEUROLOGY · NEUROLOGY SYMPTOM GUIDE

Progressive memory loss or cognitive decline

Structured history, interpretation & clinical review

Symptom 56 of 94
Clinical educational workbook
Version 1.0 · October 2026

Not for clinical use. This guide cannot diagnose, triage, or exclude an emergency. Seek emergency care for severe, sudden, or worsening symptoms.

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> **Document purpose**
> A structured educational history and diagnostic-reasoning workbook. Treatment is outside its scope.

Scope and safe use

Progressive memory, executive, or functional decline is characterized by onset, domains, daily function, behavior, medication, mood, sleep, and neurological signs.

Not for clinical use.
This educational workbook does not diagnose, triage, estimate probability, replace examination, or exclude an emergency. If a safety-screen answer is Yes or uncertain, follow the stated action rather than continuing routine interpretation.

How to complete the workbook

- Record the current episode and the person’s usual baseline; use a witness account for events with impaired awareness.
- Check one option per question unless a clinician documents a different combination. “Not sure” is unresolved information, not a negative answer.
- Complete the safety screen before all other sections. Record exact onset or last-known-well time for sudden deficits.
- Use Section 2 only after the form is complete. More than one pattern may be relevant; urgency takes precedence.
- Use Section 3 to plan focused examination and clinician-selected investigations. No test is automatic or universally required.

Specific escalation rule

New severe headache, new focal weakness or numbness, new speech/language difficulty, reduced consciousness, a prolonged seizure, severe breathing or swallowing difficulty, sudden visual loss, or rapidly progressive weakness requires emergency assessment. Call 911 in the United States.

Section 1: Input form

Checkbox history for Progressive memory loss or cognitive decline

1A. Immediate safety screen

Is the person acutely confused, struggling to breathe, having a seizure, or difficult to awaken?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Call emergency services now.

Is there new one-sided weakness, facial droop, severe imbalance, or speech/language difficulty?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Call emergency services now and record the onset time.

Is there sudden visual loss or a new painful red eye?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Seek emergency eye or emergency-department assessment now.

Is there fever with rapidly worsening illness, a new rash, severe dehydration, or an inability to keep fluids down?

☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

If Yes: Arrange same-day or emergency assessment depending on severity and current consciousness.

> **Stop rule:** Any Yes answer triggers the action printed under that question. Any Not sure answer requires prompt in-person clarification; do not treat it as No.

1B. Timeline

How did the symptom begin?

☐ Suddenly, over seconds or minutes ☐ Over hours to days ☐ Gradually over weeks or months ☐ Longstanding or since childhood ☐ Not sure

Use the first occurrence for recurrent episodes; use the current episode for a changing symptom.

What is the overall course?

☐ One persistent episode ☐ Separate recurrent episodes ☐ Steadily worsening ☐ Fluctuating or variable ☐ Currently resolved

Has this exact pattern been assessed before?

☐ Definitely new ☐ The same pattern occurred before ☐ Present and stable for a long time ☐ Not sure

1C. Discriminating features

Which change is most prominent?

☐ Forgetting recent events or repeating questions ☐ Planning, organizing, or familiar-task difficulty ☐ Word-finding or comprehension decline ☐ Getting lost, misjudging space, or visual-object difficulty

How is independent daily function affected?

☐ Independent with minor errors ☐ Finances, medicines, driving, or work affected ☐ Basic self-care now affected ☐ Not sure

Are there hallucinations, marked behavior change, sleepiness, or movement/gait symptoms?

☐ Visual hallucinations or dream enactment ☐ Gait, tremor, or stiffness ☐ Personality or behavior change ☐ None

Is there depression, sleep disorder, medication burden, thyroid/nutritional risk, or recent illness?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

1D. Associated findings

Are there other neurological symptoms—weakness, numbness, speech change, double vision, swallowing difficulty, or severe imbalance?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Are there systemic clues—fever, weight loss, cancer, infection risk, pregnancy/postpartum status, or a new medication?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

How much does this affect daily activity?

☐ Noticeable but activities continue ☐ Some activities are limited ☐ Cannot perform usual activities ☐ Not sure

1E. Clinical context

Who is being assessed?

☐ Adult or adolescent ☐ Child under 12 ☐ Adult aged 65 or older

Could a medicine, substance, withdrawal, or recent dose change be relevant?

☐ No plausible contributor ☐ Yes or possibly ☐ Not reviewed

Include sedatives, dopamine-blocking drugs, stimulants, decongestants, anticholinergics, alcohol, and non-prescribed substances when relevant.

Is there a relevant neurological, muscular, metabolic, cardiovascular, autoimmune, or sleep disorder?

☐ No known relevant condition ☐ Yes ☐ Not sure

What prior information is available?

☐ A previous examination or investigation ☐ Prior records but no clear explanation ☐ No useful prior assessment ☐ Not sure

Additional history and documentation

Record exact dates/times, witness details, relevant medication doses and changes, prior investigation reports, and the person's baseline function.

Section 2: Interpreting the input form

Answer combinations generate a differential and an assessment pathway—not a diagnosis.

> **Precedence:** Emergency safety answers override every pattern below. Otherwise, the highest-urgency fully matched pattern takes precedence. If entries are incomplete, contradictory, or match no pattern, use the unresolved-information pathway.

Pattern 1: Progressive memory-predominant decline

Which change is most prominent? Forgetting recent events or repeating questions
What is the overall course? Steadily worsening
How is independent daily function affected? Finances, medicines, driving, or work affected / Basic self-care now affected

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Progressive recent-memory decline with functional impact needs a structured neurodegenerative and reversible-cause assessment.

Differential to review:

- Alzheimer disease or another neurodegenerative cognitive disorder
- Medication, mood, sleep, metabolic, nutritional, or systemic contributor

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Pattern 2: Executive or vascular-pattern cognitive change

Which change is most prominent? Planning, organizing, or familiar-task difficulty
Are there hallucinations, marked behavior change, sleepiness, or movement/gait symptoms? Gait, tremor, or stiffness

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Executive decline with gait or movement features broadens assessment to vascular, parkinsonian, and structural disorders.

Differential to review:

- Vascular cognitive impairment or structural brain disorder
- Lewy-body, Parkinson-related, or frontotemporal disorder

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Pattern 3: Behavior, hallucination, or sleep-associated phenotype

Are there hallucinations, marked behavior change, sleepiness, or movement/gait symptoms? Visual hallucinations or dream enactment / Personality or behavior change

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Prominent early behavior or hallucination/sleep features help separate frontotemporal and Lewy-body patterns.

Differential to review:

- Lewy-body, Parkinson-related, or frontotemporal disorder

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Pattern 4: Potential reversible or aggravating contributor

Is there depression, sleep disorder, medication burden, thyroid/nutritional risk, or recent illness? Yes

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

A medication, mood, sleep, or metabolic clue warrants targeted evaluation alongside cognitive follow-up.

Differential to review:

- Medication, mood, sleep, metabolic, nutritional, or systemic contributor

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Unresolved-information pathway: The entries need structured in-person characterization.

Prompt clinical review pattern — Promptly

Do not guess missing answers or convert uncertainty into reassurance. Document what is unknown, perform an in-person examination, clarify the timeline with a witness or records when available, and reassess if any new feature appears.

Action: Arrange an in-person medical or neurological review promptly, usually within days. Seek sooner care if the pattern changes.

Section 3: Clinical review

Diagnostic modules and focused investigation logic

The examination comes before a test list. Select investigations only after localization, urgency, comorbidity, pregnancy status, renal function, anticoagulation, and prior results have been considered.

3.1 Alzheimer disease or another neurodegenerative cognitive disorder

Discriminating features: Insidious progressive memory, language, executive, or visuospatial decline with functional impact.

Logical investigations: Collateral history, cognitive and neurological examination, targeted reversible-cause tests, MRI, and specialist biomarker assessment when indicated.

3.2 Vascular cognitive impairment or structural brain disorder

Discriminating features: Stepwise change, focal signs, gait/urinary features, or imaging-risk context.

Logical investigations: Brain MRI/CT and vascular-risk assessment according to examination and course.

3.3 Lewy-body, Parkinson-related, or frontotemporal disorder

Discriminating features: Visual hallucinations, REM sleep behavior, parkinsonism, or early behavior/language disinhibition suggest alternative degenerative patterns.

Logical investigations: Detailed behavior, sleep, movement and cognitive phenotyping; specialist neurological/neuropsychological assessment.

3.4 Medication, mood, sleep, metabolic, nutritional, or systemic contributor

Discriminating features: Sedatives/anticholinergics, depression, sleep apnea, thyroid/B12 and other reversible or aggravating factors.

Logical investigations: Medication and sleep/mood review with targeted laboratory testing; do not assume these fully explain objective progression without follow-up.

Reassessment and documentation

- If the symptom pattern changes, repeat the safety screen and timeline rather than carrying forward an earlier interpretation.
- If a test is unrevealing but the deficit persists or progresses, revisit localization and seek specialist review; a normal result does not automatically end assessment.
- If symptoms resolve, document duration, completeness of recovery, recurrence, and any residual deficit. Resolved sudden focal symptoms can still require urgent vascular assessment.
- If the history and examination conflict, obtain collateral information and in-person review rather than forcing a single diagnostic label.

Selected references

Sources provide background standards and do not replace local emergency pathways or current specialist guidance. Accessed October 2026.

1. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2018, updated 2025). *Dementia: assessment, management and support for people living with dementia and their carers (NG97)*. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng97
2. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2010, updated 2023). *Delirium: prevention, diagnosis and management in hospital and long-term care (CG103)*. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg103