

Assessment and management pathways of older adults with mild cognitive impairment: descriptive review and critical interpretive synthesis

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Plain English summary

Pathways of older adults with mild cognitive impairment

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Plain English summary

When older adults (aged > 65 years) have problems with memory or thinking that show up on tests but do not have a large impact on day-to-day living, their doctors often give them the label 'mild cognitive impairment'. Some people with mild cognitive impairment go on to develop dementia, whereas others stay the same or improve over time. This review of published research looks at how the health service investigates memory problems and whether or not people find the 'label' of mild cognitive impairment helpful.

People who are concerned about their memory often seek help from their general practitioner. However, many general practitioners find it challenging to diagnose memory problems. Specialist memory clinics, often based in hospitals, are mainly set up to help people who already have a diagnosis of dementia and, therefore, might not be the best places for people with mild cognitive impairment. A person with mild cognitive impairment is likely to be given advice on how to reduce their risk of dementia and to be checked regularly by their general practitioner in case their symptoms worsen.

Interviews with people with mild cognitive impairment and their carers suggest that many find the label of mild cognitive impairment difficult to understand. Some people with mild cognitive impairment feel reassured that they do not have dementia, whereas others feel anxious about what may happen in the future. People value being offered timely access to support, but other studies suggest that patients may feel ignored by health professionals, leading to them losing trust in the health service.

We also found that how health professionals use the term 'mild cognitive impairment' has changed over time and yet professionals still cannot agree on a clear definition. This is one reason why experts continue to debate on whether or not 'mild cognitive impairment' is useful as a label for memory problems.

As the population gets older, and as possible treatments for the early stages of dementia become available, it becomes even more important that the health service can identify people with memory problems and assess their risk of developing dementia. We have identified lessons for those delivering services and areas that need further research.

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