

Memory Thieves: Spot Them, Beat Them!

Want to keep all you marbles?

Watch for these signs that you're being stalked by a memory thief.

1. **YOUR BLOOD SUGAR IS HIGH.**

Memory lapses may be in your blood—or more specifically, in your blood sugar. MRI scans of volunteers' brains suggest that high blood sugar might damage parts of the brain that deal with memory.

Protect yourself: If there's a history of high blood sugar or diabetes in your family, have your blood sugar tested regularly. Eat well and stay active—brisk walks are an effective diabetes preventive.

2. **YOU'RE PUSHING TOO HARD.** Our brains seem to rely on sleep to cement new memories. You needn't pull all-nighters to get into trouble: In one study, volunteers who slept six hours nightly for 2 weeks didn't feel sleep deprived, yet they performed substantially worse on tests of short-term memory.

Protect yourself: Make adequate rest a priority! If you can't? Micro-naps of six minutes were enough to boost volunteers' short-term performance in one study. Simply falling asleep might be enough to trigger the crucial memory process in the brain, researchers suspect.

3. **YOU'RE OVER 65.** It gets harder to absorb vitamin B12 from food as you age, and a serious deficiency can look a lot like Alzheimer's disease. Up to 20 percent of people over 65 are low in B12.

Protect yourself: If you're older and feeling fuzzy, ask your doctor if you should have your B12 level checked; you may need a supplement. Also consider a test if you're a strict vegetarian—you avoid the top food sources of the vitamin!

4. **YOU'RE DEPRESSED.** People with severe depression lose brain cells. The longer the depression lasts, the more cells are lost in areas critical to memory.

Protect yourself: Early treatment may be key. A 2008 study suggested that people who had longer episodes of depression were less likely to show memory improvement after their mood lifted.

5. **YOU TAKE ALLERGY OR SLEEPING PILLS.** Many drugs commonly prescribed for things like insomnia, incontinence, allergies, and gastrointestinal cramps also interfere with a crucial brain chemical. If you're elderly, these drugs, called anticholinergics, can cause mental foggy and forgetfulness.

Protect yourself: If you're over age 65, you're more vulnerable to side effects from diphenhydramine, an anticholinergic used in many over the counter sleep aids and allergy drugs. Mental fuzziness after starting these or any meds should prompt talking with your doctor or pharmacist.

6. **YOU SHUFFLE WHEN YOU WALK.** Doctors call it a magnetic gait because your feet seem to stick to the ground. It could signal Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus, in which ventricles in the brain swell with too much spinal fluid.

Protect yourself: A shuffling gait, incontinence and memory problems are the classic symptoms but not everyone has all three. Prompt treatment gives you the best chance of memory improvement.