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Fact Sheet for Cognitive Screening Test Medicare Annual Wellness Visit

Effective January 1, 2011 Medicare now provides an Annual Wellness Visit benefit, in addition to the “Welcome to Medicare” physical exam that occurs only in the first year of joining Medicare.

The new Annual Wellness Visit benefit includes several preventive health services, including “detection of any cognitive impairment”—essentially, this is screening for memory impairment.

MyBrainTest has received several questions from readers on cognitive screening tests, and this Fact Sheet is intended to provide useful information on this new Medicare preventive screening service.

What does “detection of any cognitive impairment” mean?

In practical terms, this means detection of short term memory impairment commonly associated with the early stages of Alzheimer’s Disease, sometimes referred to as Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI). The tests may also include some executive function (planning and reasoning) skills.

What kinds of cognitive screening tests will my doctor use?

Your doctor may administer a paper test, an online computer test, or a combination of both. The online computer tests tend to be more accurate and sensitive than older paper tests, however, there are also some well validated paper tests for cognitive impairment – [a few of these validated paper tests can be downloaded here](#).

Important Note: Many physicians may choose a well known paper test called the Mini Mental exam, or MMSE. The MMSE functions best as a dementia testing tool for moderate to severe stages of dementia, but this particular test is not very effective for detecting early signs of memory impairment.

[Your doctor can also contact MyBrainTest for a complete list of online computer tests](#) for cognitive screening that are proven to detect early signs of cognitive impairment associated with possible Alzheimer’s Disease.

Why should I be screened for cognitive impairment?

The current reality is that most people who receive a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s or another form of dementia find out 3 to 5 years after serious cognitive impairments have already started.

Getting lost in familiar areas, a sustained decline in ability to handle personal finances or medications, and leaving food to burn on the stove are typical markers that can cause a visit to the doctor’s office for a cognitive exam.

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Cognitive screening and testing on a regular basis can offer benefits in two main areas:

(1) Safety and Quality of Life decisions. Regular checkups for cognitive health allow people to make good decisions on the level of care they may need in the future. Also, the ability to avoid tragic circumstances surrounding self medication errors or kitchen accidents is important.

(2) Ability to react to newer treatment options. New treatment options hold the (not yet proven) promise of extending normal cognitive functioning by several years for people entering the early stages of Alzheimer's. In addition to a better quality of life, the implications for reducing national health care costs associated with Alzheimer's care are profound.

Is there a cure for Alzheimer's Disease?

There is no recognized cure for Alzheimer's Disease. Current medications such as donepezil can have a very modest, short term benefit on cognitive functioning, if started very early in the disease stage.

As discussed above, newer treatment options in the pipeline offer the promise of delaying the effects of Alzheimer's by a number of years. More information on the status of new treatments can be found in the research sections of the Alzheimer's Association: <http://www.alz.org/research/> and the Alzheimer's Foundation of America: <http://www.alzfdn.org/AboutAlzheimers/research.html>.

What else can I do to improve my cognitive health?

A large body of research evidence points to an active physical and cognitive lifestyle as being preventive to developing Alzheimer's Disease. Good cardiovascular health supports cognitive health. Managing body weight and chronic conditions such as diabetes are also important.

An active cognitive lifestyle includes learning new skills, and exercising a variety of cognitive abilities such as working memory, attention, executive function, and response time. Variety is the key word here – working only on crossword puzzles means that you will be really good at crossword puzzles!

Curious about your brain? Want to know how diet & exercise affect brain health?

[>Try the Healthy Brain Test](#) to learn more about ways to maintain a healthy brain.

Free memory health resource: www.memoryhealthcheck.com

More information on cognitive screening tests: <http://www.mybraintest.org/>