

A study on pain and thinking skills in older age

What the study was about

As we get older, many people notice changes in memory and in how quickly they can think.

Having chronic pain may be linked with faster changes in thinking and memory, but recent research disagrees.

In this study, we asked:

- Is there a link between how severe someone's pain is and how fast their thinking skills change?
- If a person's pain gets worse over time, do their thinking and memory change faster?

What we found

People reporting more severe pain at the start of the study tended to have quicker declines in memory and thinking.

Before adjustments, worsening pain over time looked linked to faster decline. After accounting for other health and socio-economic factors, this link was no longer clear.

In conclusion, higher pain severity is a marker of faster decline in memory and thinking skills. But pain getting worse over time does not affect this trend.

What these results mean

This is an association, not proof that pain causes memory problems. If you live with ongoing pain, consider keeping an eye on your memory and talk to your GP about any new or worsening issues. Clinicians can support memory health alongside pain care, for example by helping with sleep and mood.

More research is needed to understand why pain and thinking skills are connected. Future projects could ask about the role painkillers have on memory and thinking in later life.

Link to the study: <http://www.doi.org/10.1097/j.pain.0000000000004052>

If you live with chronic pain, what you can do now

- Tell your GP about new or worsening problems with memory, attention, or word-finding
- Look after your sleep, your mood and keep moving in ways that feel safe
- Stay connected (family, friends, other people with chronic pain)
- Seek out more support if you need it:
 - **NHS Inform** (Scotland) – <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/chronic-pain/>
 - **Pain Concern** (support) – <https://painconcern.org.uk/> – Helpline: **0300 123 0789**
 - **Flippin' Pain** (information and education) – <https://www.flippinpain.co.uk/>
 - **Live Well with Pain** (self-management tools) – <https://www.livewellwithpain.co.uk/>