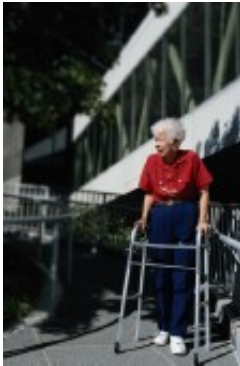


# Faltering steps may indicate oncoming dementia

July 16 2012

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3 studies link changes in walking skills to weakening mental state, including Alzheimer's.

(HealthDay) -- Three new studies suggest that a person's walking ability or type of gait may give hints about oncoming Alzheimer's disease.

The studies, presented this week in Vancouver at the annual meeting of the Alzheimer's Association, highlight changes in walking patterns as a potential sign that [mental decline](#) is underway.

In one four-year study, a Swiss team led by Dr. Stephanie Bridenbaugh of the Basel Mobility Center tracked the walking ability of nearly 1,200 elderly memory clinic outpatients and compared the results to the walking ability of healthy people.

Tests revealed that a slowing of pace and a change in [gait](#) was linked to progression of mental decline, whether the mental state known as [mild cognitive impairment](#) (MCI) or full-blown Alzheimer's disease.

"Those with Alzheimer's [dementia](#) walked slower than those with MCI, who in turn walked slower than those who were cognitively healthy," Bridenbaugh explained in a news release issued by the conference.

In a second trial, researchers at the Mayo Clinic Study of Aging, led by Dr. Rodolfo Savica, also looked at walking patterns among more than 1,300 patients.

Two or more sessions involving tests of both mental and walking skills were conducted with each patient over a roughly 15-month period.

The result: Declines in mental skills, including losses in memory and executive function, were associated with a slowed walking pace and shortening of the patient's stride.

"These results support a possible role of gait changes as an early predictor of cognitive impairment," Savica said in the news release.

Lastly, a Japanese team from the [Tohoku](#) University Graduate School of Medicine in Sendai, led by Kenichi Meguro, focused on 525 men and women aged 75 and older. The researchers conducted neurological, psychological and physical tests to assess the potential of a connection between gait and dementia.

Their results mirrored both the Swiss and American studies -- as walking abilities declined, so too did the patients' mental skills.

"Gait velocity was significantly decreased as the severity of dementia symptoms increased," Meguro noted in the new release. The bottom line,

he said: "Gait should no longer be considered a simple, automatic motor activity that is independent of cognition. They are linked."

The studies uncovered a link between walking ability and dementia, but did not prove a cause-and-effect connection. Research presented at medical meetings is typically considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

**More information:** To find out more about Alzheimer's disease, head to the [U.S. National Institute on Aging](#).

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