Saying ‘erm’ or ‘ah’ may be an early sign of dementia

New research suggests pace, pauses and sentence structure can reveal early cognitive decline years before memory problems appear, says Polly Dunbar

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It strikes us all in midlife and beyond – you’re rhapsodising about a new book or programme, only to draw a blank when it comes to the name of its author or star. It’s common to worry that these memory slips could be a warning sign of dementia.



However, a major new review of studies shows the earliest red flags of dementia – which affects around one in 14 people over 65 in the UK – lie in the way we speak, rather than the odd word we can’t remember. From the speed and rhythm of our speech to the complexity of our vocabulary and sentences, these changes are being linked to the first stages of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

Here’s our guide to the signs that might indicate something more serious, and how to boost your language and brain abilities to help stave off dementia.

The speed of speech, rather than difficulty finding words, is a more accurate indicator of brain health in older people, according to a 2024 study by the University of Toronto. A group of 125 healthy adults aged between 18 and 85 were given a series of cognitive and language tests. Researchers also analysed natural speech patterns, including how quickly participants spoke and how often they paused. These results were then compared with standard tests of memory, attention and planning.

What stood out as a negative indicator from these tests was the speed of speech. They found that people who spoke more quickly in everyday conversation performed better across a range of cognitive tests, particularly those linked to executive function, which controls how quickly the brain takes in information, makes sense of it and responds.

Dr Emer MacSweeney, a consultant neuroradiologist and chief executive of Re:Cognition Health, a leading clinic delivering trials of Alzheimer’s disease treatments, says: “If someone who has always spoken at a normal rate begins speaking more slowly, it’s a worrying sign.”

Most of us experience some degree of “lethologica”, or the so-called “tip-of-the-tongue” effect, where a word is just out of reach. As a result, we can find ourselves buying time with filler words such as “erm” and “ah” – and this is usually nothing to worry about. “As we age, there are changes in the brain’s white matter, the wiring that allows signals to travel between different regions,” says

Dr Tim Beanland, head of knowledge and learning at the Alzheimer’s Society. “It’s like going from a three-lane to a two-lane motorway: information still gets through, but it’s slower.”

But the University of Toronto study, and others, suggest using these filler words can also signal problems with our executive function. “In people with early Alzheimer’s disease, it’s not just the occasional hesitation, but a pattern that becomes more obvious over time,” says MacSweeney.

Research increasingly shows that the length and frequency of pauses in speech are among the earliest detectable signs of cognitive decline. Even when someone is using the right words, they may leave noticeable gaps midsentence before producing them.

These pauses reflect a slowdown

‘The cadence and rhythm starts to change. Sentences become more fragmented’

in the brain’s processing speed and the systems responsible for turning thoughts into language, rather than an inability to remember specific words.

In normal ageing, pauses tend to be brief. But in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease, they often become longer and more frequent.

In the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease, sentence structure can be affected, according to the latest research. While people can still construct grammatically correct sentences, studies have found a shift away from multi-clause phrasing towards shorter, more linear sentences, as the brain tries to reduce the effort required to organise thoughts.

In practice, this can mean using fewer subordinate clauses, along with words such as ‘because’, ‘although’ and ‘when’, which link different strands of a sentence.

Instead of saying, ‘I didn’t go out because of the torrential rain,’ for example, someone might say, ‘I didn’t go out. It was raining.’

“The cadence and rhythm of what people are saying start to change,” says MacSweeney. “Their sentences become less sophisticated and more fragmented.” Speech can also sound more formulaic, relying on familiar, repetitive phrasing.

It is vital to keep finding ways to stimulate the brain as we age, says Beanland. “There is evidence that this is protective and helps increase the proteins that support the growth of neurons, the brain’s fundamental units,” he says.

A 2026 study from the Rush University Medical Centre found that engaging in intellectually stimulating activities throughout life can lower the risk of dementia by 38 per cent.

Recommended activities include learning a language, which, alongside reading and writing, acts as a form of strength training for the brain, increasing grey and white matter.

Puzzles and word games also help. “Being socially active is great for exercising your language skills, as are word puzzles such as crosswords and Wordle – but it’s all about challenging your brain, so it’s important to keep stretching yourself by finding harder versions or trying to do them more quickly,” says Beanland, author of the Brain Health Puzzle Book.

Other proven ways to minimise your risk of dementia include “exercise, eating a low-sugar Mediterranean diet, not smoking or drinking too much, and sleeping for no less than seven hours and no more than eight,” says MacSweeney.

Exercise is especially important: an Alzheimer’s Society review found that people who are physically active are up to 20 per cent less likely to develop dementia than those who are inactive.