

Understanding the Mini-Mental Exam

By Lynne Grip

Taking tests is low on the list of things most people enjoy doing, but tests are one of life's givens. One example is the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) developed in 1975 by psychiatrists Marshal F. Folstein, Susan Folstein, and Paul R. McHugh. Since that time, it remains the most reliable tool to assess cognitive status and continues to be widely used in clinical and research settings to assess for the presence and progression of dementia.

The MMSE consists of 30 screening items and takes approximately 10 minutes to be administered by a trained professional. It tests for:

- Orientation to time and place;
- Registration, or the ability to learn the names of three objects;
- Attention and calculation—the ability to spell the word *world* backward and count backward from 100 in increments of seven; and
- Recall, or the ability to remember the names of three objects previously learned.

Though there is variability in how the scores are interpreted, here is one typical classification as defined by the Alzheimer's Association:

- 25–30: No cognitive impairment
- 20–24: Mild cognitive impairment
- 13–20: Moderate cognitive impairment
- 12 or below: Severe cognitive impairment

The MMSE is only one part of a dementia assessment, and it's important to remember that a low score on the test is not a definitive diagnosis of dementia. Results can be influenced by level of education, socio-economic factors, and other variables. Additionally, the person's history, symptoms, physical exam, neurological workup, and results of other tests must be considered. For someone already diagnosed with dementia, the MMSE can help identify severity of symptoms and rate of progression.

Curious about the test and want to see it for yourself? Here is [a copy of the Mini-Mental State Exam](#).

Resources

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/symptoms-and-diagnosis/diagnosis/mmse-test>

https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/diagnosis/medical_tests

<https://www.aafp.org/afp/2016/1015/p635.html>