

MidLife Matters - Menopause and Memory - December 2019

Renee Morissette, MD

Most people know that menopause means hot flashes, poor sleep and mood changes. However, it is rarely recognized that memory problems are also a frequent concern during the menopausal transition.

Studies confirm that these memory complaints are associated with decreased performance on memory tasks. Testing shows that verbal memory, which relates to the memory of words and language tasks, takes the biggest hit during the menopausal transition. A woman's processing speed and ability to learn new information may also be affected. Women tend not to have changes in "working memory", which relates to short term memory and reasoning.

To some extent memory lapses can be chalked up to normal aging, poor sleep and mood changes, but studies support that the memory troubles of menopause are due to more than that. It is the decline in estrogen itself that appears to play the biggest role. The exact effect of estrogen loss on the brain is not completely understood.

Memory changes understandably lead many women to be worried that they are developing dementia. Though women are at increased risk for dementia compared to men later in life, the memory problems experienced at menopause are rarely a sign of dementia. Interestingly, before menopause, women tend to perform better on verbal memory tasks compared to men. This advantage may make it more difficult to detect memory problems in women with early dementia, delaying diagnosis. Though, generally speaking, more concerning symptoms for dementia include neglecting hygiene, forgetting to use common objects, being unable to follow directions, getting lost in well-known places or being unable to carry out basic daily activities.

Even though the vast majority of women do not have dementia at menopause, many women remain distressed that their symptoms affect their ability to work and function as well as before. Possible strategies for improving memory include:

1. Practicing healthy sleep habits.
2. Eating nutritious foods.
3. Engaging in regular cardiovascular exercise.
4. Keeping your brain active with puzzles, word games, reading and learning something new.
5. Continuing to socialize with friends.
6. Considering medication, such as menopausal hormone therapy or Vyvanse.

The best news is that menopausal memory concerns are temporary. By all accounts, women's memories improve after the transition, so relief is on the horizon.

REFERENCES:

1. Impact of Sex and Menopausal Status on Episodic Memory Circuitry in Early Midlife. E. Jacobs et al. *Journal of Neuroscience*. 28 September 2016, 36 (39) 10163 – 10173.
2. Menopause, Memory, and Alzheimer's Disease. P. Maki. *Society for Women's Health Research*. June 7, 2017.
3. Verbal memory and menopause. P. Maki. *Maturitas*. November 2015, 82 (3) 288 – 290.
4. Evidence for Cognitive Aging in Midlife Women: Study of Women's Health Across the Nation. A.

Karlamangla et al. PLoS One. 2017, 12 (1).

5. Does Menopause Cause Memory Loss? S.Y. Morris and D. Wilson. Healthline.