



What You Should Know About Memory and Concentration at Midlife

Difficulty concentrating and remembering are common complaints of women around the time of menopause. These changes can be frightening. They may lead women to think they have early symptoms of dementia. This is not usually the case. There is no strong evidence that concentration or memory actually decline because of natural menopause. The reason is more likely that our mental processes change throughout life—especially as we age.

How does menopause affect memory?

As women become more forgetful, they wonder if less estrogen is to blame. But there is little proof that lower estrogen levels affect the brain. These changes are usually due to normal aging or mood. They usually go away after menopause.

However, younger women who have had “surgical” menopause (such as hysterectomy) may experience menopausal symptoms quickly and severely. Small studies have shown that this process can have a negative effect on memory. Mental skills like remembering words can be difficult right after surgical menopause.

What mental changes can occur as we age?

As we age, our mental abilities can slow down. Also, stress at midlife can affect sleep. Work demands, teenage children, the “empty nest” syndrome, aging parents, relationships, health concerns, and financial challenges take their toll. Lack of sleep influences the ability to concentrate (hot flashes can affect sleep, too). Being tired during the day can cause you to be less alert and lead to problems at work and in your daily life.

The good news is that as you age, you have the ability to continue to gain knowledge, skills, and expertise.

How can we stay mentally strong?

There are many ways to keep our minds strong. Physical activity, mental activity, and an active social life have positive effects on the mind. These activities can increase our mental capacity. They may ward off the effects of aging and disease that can contribute to dementia. Proper nutrition is also important. Foods



that are healthy for your heart are also healthy for your brain. The reason is that damaged blood vessels affect both the heart and brain.

Perhaps the best strategy for keeping a healthy brain is to eat right, exercise physically and mentally, minimize stress, and strive for balance in a socially fulfilling life.

Where can I learn more?

- How to protect yourself from loss of memory: www.womenshealth.gov/aging/mental-health/aging-brain.cfm.
- What changes are and are not normal with aging? www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/memory.html.
- When to ask for help with serious memory problems: www.nia.nih.gov/healthinformation/publications/forgetfulness.htm.

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