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Can Menopause Be Blamed for Increased Forgetfulness and Lack of Attention?

New study suggests that a woman's menopause stage can affect cognitive performance; declines in memory may persist in the postmenopause period

CLEVELAND, Ohio (Jan. 13, 2021)—If you're a bit more forgetful or having more difficulty processing complex concepts than in the past, the problem may be your menopause stage. A new study claims that menopause stage is a key determinant of cognition and, contrary to previous studies, shows that certain cognitive declines may continue into the postmenopause period. Study results are published online today in *Menopause*, the journal of The North American Menopause Society (NAMS).

It's commonly assumed that people's memories decline with age, as does their ability to learn new things and grasp challenging concepts. But multiple large-scale studies have suggested that menopause is a sex-specific risk factor for cognitive dysfunction independent of aging and menopause symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and hot flashes.

Many of these previous studies, however, did not characterize the duration of cognitive changes taking place between premenopause and perimenopause but suggested that difficulties in memory and processing may resolve in the postmenopause period. A new study involving more than 440 primarily low-income women of color, including women with HIV, concluded that menopause stage is a key determinant of cognition but that clinically significant cognitive declines/cognitive impairment persist into postmenopause, affecting primarily learning and memory. Subtler declines in attention were additionally found to continue into the postmenopause period.

Researchers theorized that the difference in results relative to the duration of cognitive decline could be explained by the fact that this newer study included more low-income women with multiple risk factors for cognitive dysfunction, including the presence of HIV. Previous studies have confirmed that cognitive function is compromised by an array of risk factors, including HIV, poverty, low education, substance abuse, high levels of stress, limited access to quality healthcare, mental health problems, and medical comorbidities.

The new study is the first known study to assess changes in cognitive performance across menopause stages. It specifically showed cognitive declines over time in learning, memory, and attention from

premenopause to early perimenopause and from premenopause to postmenopause. Many of these changes were documented to reach a clinically significant level of cognitive impairment.

Results are published in the article “Cognitive changes during the menopausal transition: a longitudinal study in women with and without HIV.”

“This study, which included a racially diverse sample of low-income women and women with HIV, adds to existing literature on cognitive changes across the menopause transition and showed a significant cognitive decline in learning and memory that persisted into postmenopause. Additional research is needed to confirm these findings and to identify the factors responsible for individual differences in cognitive changes,” says Dr. Stephanie Faubion, NAMS medical director.

For more information about menopause and healthy aging, visit www.menopause.org.

Founded in 1989, The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) is North America’s leading nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the health and quality of life of all women during midlife and beyond through an understanding of menopause and healthy aging. Its multidisciplinary membership of 2,000 leaders in the field—including clinical and basic science experts from medicine, nursing, sociology, psychology, nutrition, anthropology, epidemiology, pharmacy, and education—makes NAMS uniquely qualified to serve as the definitive resource for health professionals and the public for accurate, unbiased information about menopause and healthy aging. To learn more about NAMS, visit www.menopause.org.