

Menopause Symptoms and Memory Loss

While you may experience the misery of hot flashes and mood swings as you enter menopause, one thing you can't blame on the "change" is memory loss. In the latest study that exonerates menopause as a cause of impairing the ability to recall, Taiwanese researchers compared the memory of hundreds of women before they had any menopausal symptoms to their memory as they entered menopause. They found the women who were going through the menopausal process scored as well or nearly as well on five different cognitive function tests. Results of the study are to be presented Oct. 4 at the American Neurological Association annual meeting in Toronto. "When women go into perimenopause, they don't need to worry about cognitive decline," said Dr. Jong-Ling Fuh, an attending physician at Taipei Veterans General Hospital and an associate professor of Yang-Ming University School of Medicine. The researchers said the myth of memory loss during menopause is a perception some women have because as they went through menopause, they felt their memory wasn't as sharp as it had been before. Studies suggesting that hormone replacement therapy might protect against dementia strengthened that belief. However, a large study later found that in older women, hormone replacement therapy not only didn't help protect women from dementia, but could actually increase the risk. To try to answer the question of whether menopause did have any effect on memory, Fuh and her colleagues studied nearly 700 premenopausal women living on a group of rural islands between Taiwan and China. The Taiwanese government restricted access to these islands until the 1990s, so the authors report that the study's population was nearly homogeneous, which would help rule out other potentially causative factors of memory loss. The women were between the ages of 40 and 54. None of them had had a hysterectomy, and none took hormone replacement therapy during the study. All took five cognitive tests designed to assess their memory and cognitive skills at the start of the study, and then again 18 months later. During the study period, 23 percent of the women began to have symptoms of menopause. The researchers then compared the memory of the women who had entered menopause to those who had not, and found very little difference. In four of the five tests, there were no statistically significant differences in the two groups of women. Only on one test was the difference statistically significant, and that difference, said Fuh, was very slight. This test was designed to assess verbal memory and involved showing the women 70 nonsensical figures. Some of the figures were repeated during the test, while most were not. The women were asked whether they had seen the figure earlier. "For women, menopause does not mean you'll develop memory loss," said Dr. Raina Ernstoff, an attending neurologist at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Mich. As you're going through perimenopause and experiencing symptoms like hot flashes, she said, you may feel lousy and have trouble sleeping, which might temporarily affect your cognitive skills. "I don't think declining estrogen levels are what causes memory loss," said Dr. Steven Goldstein, an obstetrician/gynecologist at New York University Medical Center in New York City. "It's not like your memory is bopping along, doing fine and then takes this big dive during menopause, like bone density can." Both Ernstoff and Goldstein said they weren't aware of many women who believed that menopause might cause significant memory loss. They also both felt that results from this group of women who were so homogeneous might not apply to different groups of women, such as those living in more industrialized society. And they both said that other factors that weren't studied could play a role in memory loss, such as hypertension, which can contribute to vascular dementia. Ernstoff also pointed out that the education backgrounds can play a large role in memory loss. Fuh acknowledged the researchers did attempt to control the data for educational differences. SOURCES: Jong-Ling Fuh, M.D., attending physician, Taipei Veterans General Hospital, and associate professor, Yang-Ming University School of Medicine, Taipei, Taiwan; Steven Goldstein, M.D., obstetrician/gynecologist, New York University Medical Center, and professor, obstetrics/gynecology, New York University School of Medicine, New York City; Raina Ernstoff, M.D., attending neurologist, William Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak, Mich., and member, Alzheimer's Board of Detroit; Oct. 4, 2004, presentation, American Neurological Association, Toronto.

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