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# Menopause and Cognition

By Dr Clare Spencer

Menopause can have a significant impact on cognitive function for many women, which can in turn affect their confidence and self-belief. The main cognitive symptoms experienced are brain fog, lack of concentration, memory changes and difficulty finding words, and they are more common than you might think.

Research conducted in 2022 by the Fawcett Society for Channel 4 reported that over 70% of women aged 45-55 surveyed experienced brain fog in some stage of the menopause transition. Other surveys show that around 40-50% of women experience memory and concentration issues related to menopause.

## How can menopause affect cognition?

### Decreasing and fluctuating oestrogen levels

Like so many other symptoms of menopause, the fluctuation and ultimate decline in oestrogen levels impacts our cognitive function. That's because oestrogen plays a vital role in how the brain works. Different areas of the brain perform different functions. For example, some brain areas take care of memory while others regulate mood. Oestrogen is essential for the normal functioning of many of these areas and helps different parts of the brain communicate with each other.

### Decreasing testosterone levels

Changes to cognitive function also occur, although to a lesser extent, as a result of the decline of testosterone levels.

### The impact of other menopause symptoms

Other menopause symptoms can also have an impact on cognitive function – anxiety and depression in particular. You can imagine how vicious cycles are set up as anxiety plus memory loss lead to feelings of stress, which in turn leads to worsening memory loss and poor concentration, as well as further fuelling anxiety and impacting sleep. Stress can also make cognitive symptoms worse.

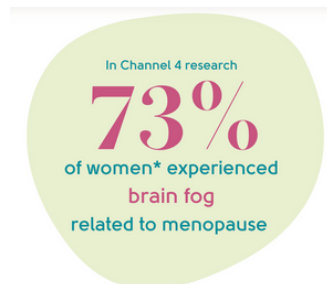
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## How can you tell the difference between menopause-related memory loss/brain fog and early onset dementia?

So many women worry about whether their symptoms indicate early dementia. The first thing to say is that dementia for women under the age of 65 is very rare – around 0.01% (the incidence of dementia increases with age).

In terms of knowing whether your symptoms are dementia or menopause related, the key things to look out for are the timing and severity of symptoms. Dementia symptoms can be subtle but are usually progressive, worsening over time and significantly impacting on your ability to function. While menopause symptoms also impact on your ability to function, they don't usually worsen over time and can be managed by HRT, or other approaches. Cognitive symptoms that start alongside other menopause symptoms are more likely to be related to the menopause transition.

Sometimes cognitive symptoms are the first indication of the menopause transition – and this can cause anxiety, as there are no other symptoms to confirm the menopause diagnosis. Speak to your GP if you have any concerns about your symptoms as there are other medical causes that may need to be checked for example, abnormalities in thyroid function or diabetes. There are screening tests that your GP can perform to further investigate whether symptoms are related to dementia. While these tests are not 100% accurate, they help to give an indication on how severe your symptoms are.



## How can you manage cognitive symptoms?

The good news is that there are a range of things that you can do to help manage these symptoms, from lifestyle to medical:

- Sleep - try to get plenty of quality sleep. Brain fog and memory/concentration issues can be connected to lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep.
- Exercise - there's lots of evidence that exercise can help brain function. So while it may be the last thing you feel like doing, just putting on your trainers and walking for five or ten minutes in the ad breaks or while listening to a podcast can help you feel better.

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- Diet - there isn't a single best diet or food for brain function, but make sure your diet is rich in oily fish, fruit and vegetables. Keep sugar intake low and avoid excess alcohol
  - Manage stress by whatever means you find helpful
  - Make sure that you give your brain a break – find time to relax and switch off for a period of time every day
  - Develop your own coping strategies to decrease anxiety associated with symptoms – whether this is lists, a wall of sticky notes – whatever helps you
  - Brain activities – keep your brain active!
  - HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) - HRT can improve your sense of wellbeing, help you to feel better, and improve energy, concentration, and memory. It can improve physical and psychological symptoms that can interfere with brain function – for example, hot flushes at night that keep you awake. You may feel anxious about taking HRT because of the well-publicised (small) risks, particularly of breast cancer. In reality, these risks are tiny for most women. Lifestyle factors, such as how much you weigh and how much alcohol you drink, can have a greater impact on your risk of breast cancer than HRT. For most women, the benefits of menopause symptom control and reduction in risk of osteoporosis and heart disease far outweigh any small risks.
  - Testosterone - this seems to be important for some women. Although it's not licenced for women, or for this specific purpose, it can be prescribed by a menopause specialist.

Finally, and most importantly, talk to your GP if your symptoms are getting worse or worrying you. Brain fog can be a symptom of other medical conditions, such as thyroid disease, depression, cardiovascular disease, head trauma, abnormal blood calcium levels, liver disease, stress, and drug and alcohol abuse. Low vitamin B6 and B12 may also play a part, as can some medications. Your GP can organise further investigations and management strategies if you need them.

You can learn more about the symptoms of menopause, what causes them and how to manage them when you visit the [Symptom Checker](#) on [My Menopause Centre's](#) website.



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