

Don't forget to read this article.....

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PHOTO BY JEFF SILKER

.....Memory Loss in Women

Ingrid Bergman, the famous Swedish actress, is quoted as saying “Happiness is good health and a bad memory.” While most women I know would agree that good health goes a long way towards happiness, few would enjoy having a bad memory. Women are more likely to be aware of and troubled by forgetfulness than men, and they want to do something about it. Despite the jokes husbands often make about their wives never forgetting anything, a lot of women have concerns about their memory from time to time. And it is little wonder women feel that way: getting kids to school and yourself to work, shopping, meal preparation, and household chores just to name a few. You must juggle everyone’s increasingly busy schedule often with little help.

Then comes menopause with changing moods and hectic lives that make it harder to keep track of everything. Patients tell me they walk into a room and completely forget what they went in for, or they have to write everything down so they don’t forget it, but then can’t find their list! Finally in retirement when life should be less stressful, the incidence of Alzheimer’s begins to rise. It’s a minor nuisance to women who begin to forget things, but frightening when facing the loss of independence that comes with full dementia. Let’s take a look at what memory is, and what women can do to prevent – or even reverse – problems with memory.

Memory and the Brain

Human memory is one of nature’s most fascinating phenomena. Our brains are designed to store, retain, and retrieve large amounts of information. The brain usually knows what information to keep on hand and what to forget. Most scientists divide memory into three parts. The first, or working memory, is short-term. Usually only small amounts of information can be kept in short-term memory, like phone numbers we need to remember only long enough to dial. The mid-range or intermediate memory keeps all the information you’ve consciously or unconsciously absorbed within the last couple hours or days. Eventually you either forget things because they are not important (what did you have for lunch last week?) or transfer it to long-term memory. Long-term memory is responsible for storing our thoughts and observations of our past. Childhood memories, important names and addresses, even the trivia you recall when playing *Jeopardy!* are stored here.

Every day our brain registers what we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, and think. These observations are then moved to short-term, intermediate, and then long-term memory as needed. Sight is our strongest sense for short-term memory and accounts for almost three-quarters of what we can recall immediately. Hearing is the least reliable of our senses. Although we may have great memories for music or the sound of someone’s voice, they are associated with the emotional content evoked by the music or thoughts of the person. Most of what we hear is more abstract and lacks the emotional context that makes it “stick” in our memories. Our earliest memories are often created through the sense of touch. The way something feels, such as a soft caress on the cheek, or the texture of a baby blanket, can be ►



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Nothing fixes a thing so intensely
in the memory as the wish to forget it.

Michel de Montaigne, *French Philosopher*

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easily recalled. The sense of smell creates some of our strongest and most vivid long-term memories. Recall the smell of your mother's meatloaf, the scent of your old boyfriend's aftershave, or the flowers you got for Valentine's Day.

Memory Loss and Menopause

Menopausal women often complain of "brain freeze" or the inability to retrieve certain information when they need it. You may notice trouble finding the word you want, or a new coworker's name. Women complain of constantly losing things like keys, and the inability to function as well at their job. Memory complaints are common at menopause and should not be overlooked. There is no clear cause. It was once thought that fluctuating levels of estrogen were to blame for fuzzy thinking during menopause.

Estrogen does play a role in memory. Estrogen receptors in the hippocampus, an important memory center, stimulate neurotransmitters, the important brain chemicals that allow nerve cells to communicate with one another. Estrogen also helps dilate blood vessels in the brain increasing the flow of oxygen-rich red blood cells and other vital nutrients to the brain. Several small studies suggested estrogen was helpful and may even decrease the incidence of Alzheimer's. However a very large study, the *Women's Health Initiative Memory Study*, showed that replacing estrogen with equine estrogen (derived from pregnant mares) was not helpful and carried risks of increased breast cancer and heart disease. Lack of sleep, poor nutrition, and stress – all common in menopause – make it hard for the brain to keep up with all it needs to remember.

Memory and Stress

So why are you forgetting things more than you used to? Stress could be the culprit. Your ability to concentrate and make decisions, along with short-term memory, may be one of the first areas of mental function hit by stress. Chronic stress is especially toxic to brain cells involved in memory. When life pulls you five different ways at once you are less likely to concentrate on the details. And the less you pay attention, the less you're going to remember. Paying attention is the most basic and most forgotten memory aid. Don't expect to remember a person's name if you are thinking about what you're going to have for lunch when you are introduced. Focus on what you want to remember. If it doesn't register in your brain initially, you have no chance of remembering it later. So when you have key information to recall, stop whatever else you may be doing and spend a couple of minutes concentrating, then move on to your next task. Studies show that many women believe that members of their gender are good at remembering "female" things like grocery lists, and bad at remembering "male" things like directions. Research shows both men and women have similar memory ability but apply it differently due to lingering stereotypes. If you want to improve any area of your memory – grocery lists, directions, or anything else – practice and pay attention.

Tips to Boost your Memory

We all forget things sometimes. There are steps we can take to increase our memory. Better memory helps us get through the day with less stress!



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Tips to Boost your Memory

- 1. Exercise your brain.** Giving your mind a workout actually causes your brain cells to make new connections allowing the cells to communicate better with each other. This can help with making new memories as well as recall of stored information. There are many things you can do to exercise you mind. Some are as simple as doing crosswords, sudoku puzzles, playing chess, and reading. There are added benefits to learning new things such as starting a hobby, learning to play a musical instrument, or studying a foreign language. The key is to find something you enjoy and find challenging. Then do it regularly. When it comes to matters of the mind or memory, it's use it or lose it!
- 2. Exercise your body.** We all know that exercise keeps our muscles in shape but did you know that exercise also keeps your mind in shape? Exercise improves blood circulation to the brain and can reduce the aging-related loss of brain tissue. Brain scan studies have shown that the grey matter in brains of individuals who are physically fit is in better shape than those who don't exercise. And regular aerobic exercise has been associated with a decreased incidence of Alzheimer's disease.
- 3. Eat healthy.** Good nutrition is not only important for your body, it's essential for your brain and memory. The American Academy of Neurology recommends a diet rich in fruits and vegetables such as berries, oranges, spinach, carrots, broccoli, tomatoes, and sweet potatoes. These foods are high in antioxidants and help to protect the brain against stroke and other injury. The *Nurses Health Study* is a long running study that has followed more than 13,000 women for many years. They were given extensive tests in their sixties and again ten years later. Women who consumed eight servings of lettuce, spinach, and other leafy greens per week scored better on memory tests than those who ate only three servings. Similarly, those who ate five servings of cruciferous vegetables like cauliflower and broccoli, stayed sharper than those who ate only two. Blueberries, called "brain-berries" by some experts, contain polyphenols that improve the ability of brain cells to communicate with each other. B vitamins such as niacin and folic acid may help to prevent memory loss. Good fats for the brain come from olive oil, walnuts, and omega 3 such as fish oil. Think about the carbohydrates you eat. Highly processed and instant foods can spike blood sugar levels and the brain doesn't function as well when blood sugar is high. Finally, alcohol can interfere with the ability to form new long-term memories. For most women, that means no more than one drink daily.

If you haven't caught on to a very important fact of life, remember this. Anything important in life takes work...a clean house, good relationships, good reviews at the end of the year, being physically fit, and a healthy memory. With a little stimulation, your memory can become better than ever and hopefully will never become a serious problem.

Right now I'm having amnesia and déjà vu at the same time. I think I've forgotten this before! W

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