

Clear-Head Basics

The word that vanishes mid-sentence frightens women more than any other midlife symptom, because of what we assume it means. The long study that followed women through the transition says something different, and it is the most reassuring finding in this whole field. Here it is, with what actually helps and what to stop paying for.



1 What the fog is: a stall, not a slope

Read this part twice, because it is the thing nobody tells you. During the menopause transition, learning stalls. It does not fall off a cliff and it does not keep falling. Before and after the transition, the same women keep improving on the same tests the way everyone does with practice.

In the SWAN study, published in *Neurology*, women were tested repeatedly through the transition. Premenopausal, early perimenopausal and postmenopausal women all improved their processing speed scores with repeated testing, which is what normal brains do. In late perimenopause, that improvement stopped. Verbal memory showed the same pattern: climbing before and after, flat during. The stall is real, it is measurable, and it is a phase.

2 Fix the nights before you investigate the brain

Most of what gets called fog is sleep debt wearing a disguise, and in midlife the nights break for reasons that have nothing to do with memory: heat, early waking, a bladder, a racing mind at 3am. Two weeks of better sleep is the cheapest diagnostic test you will ever run on yourself.

If the nights are the problem, the protocol in my sleep guide is the one with trial evidence behind it, including in women with night-time hot flashes. Do that first, then judge the fog.

3 Stop asking your memory to do work that paper does better

This is not a concession, it is how competent people operate under load. One list, one place, written the moment the thing arrives. Names and numbers into the phone while the person is still talking. The mental energy you save on retrieval goes back into thinking.

No trial has measured notebooks against brain fog in perimenopausal women, and I am not going to pretend otherwise. What the SWAN data supports is that this is a period to carry yourself differently rather than to fight yourself harder.

4 One thing at a time, for now

Estrogen used to make switching between tasks feel free, and in the transition the bill arrives. Finish the email before opening the message. Put the phone in another room for the hour that matters. The recall improves when the attention stops being divided three ways.

5 Protein at breakfast, movement after meals

A coffee-and-toast morning is a glucose spike with a crash attached, and the crash lands at eleven, which is exactly when women describe the worst of the fog. This is the same lever as in the weight guide and it costs nothing to test for a fortnight.

Light walking after eating lowered post-meal glucose and insulin in a 2022 meta-analysis, and bodyweight breaks did the same in a Diabetes Care trial. Steadier glucose through the morning is the mechanism, measured on the glucose rather than on the fog itself.



Fog, or something that needs a doctor

The difference matters, and it is not subtle once it is written down. The left column is the transition. The right column is a reason to make an appointment this month.

Usually the transition	Get it looked at
The word is on the tip of your tongue and arrives ten minutes later	You cannot recall the word at all, later or with a prompt
You walked into the room and forgot why, then remembered	You get lost on a route you have driven for years
You repeat a question you already asked today	Family notice you repeating the same story within one conversation
Bad days track with bad nights	It is getting steadily worse month on month regardless of sleep
You can follow a recipe, a form, a conversation	Familiar tasks like paying a bill or using the cooker have become confusing

The fortnight that tells you what you are dealing with

Change these four together and judge afterwards, not during.

- ☐ Protein at breakfast every day, not toast alone.
- ☐ The sleep window protocol if you wake in the night, or at minimum a fixed wake time every day including weekends.
- ☐ One list, one place, for everything. Write it the moment it appears, not later.
- ☐ Single-task the hour that matters most, with the phone in another room.

Worth asking your doctor to check

- ☐ Thyroid function, because an underactive thyroid reads exactly like fog.
- ☐ B12 and ferritin, especially with heavy periods or years of vegetarian eating.
- ☐ Medication review: antihistamines, some blood pressure drugs, sleeping tablets and anticholinergics all blur thinking.
- ☐ Alcohol, honestly counted. It is the most common reversible cause of foggy mornings in women our age.
- ☐ Depression and anxiety, which present as concentration problems far more often than as sadness in midlife.

Three things to stop doing

This is early dementia. The SWAN pattern is the opposite of a dementia trajectory: performance stalls during the transition and resumes improving afterwards. Dementia does not pause and then recover. If your symptoms match the right-hand column in the table above, see a doctor, and if they match the left, you are watching a phase rather than a decline.

Ginkgo, or whichever brain supplement is being advertised this year. Ginkgo biloba was tested properly in the Ginkgo Evaluation of Memory study, a randomized trial that ran for years and published in JAMA. Dementia occurred at 3.3 per 100 person-years on ginkgo against 2.9 on placebo. It did not prevent anything. The money is better spent on a mattress or a dietitian.

Hormone therapy will clear my head. Hormone therapy has real uses and this is not a reliable one. In the WHIMS trial, women aged 65 and over taking estrogen plus progestin had twice the rate of probable dementia as placebo, a hazard ratio of 2.05. That trial started treatment late in life and does not describe a woman of 48 taking hormone therapy for hot flashes. The honest summary: discuss hormone therapy for the symptoms it treats, and do not take it as a cognitive treatment.

The rest of it is a book



This is one chapter's worth. Estrogen Left the Chat: Biohacking Menopause works through sleep, weight, mood and hormones the same way: what was tested, on whom, the number, and what to do about it tomorrow.

[See the book on Amazon](#)

I am a nutrition specialist, not a physician. This is education, not medical advice or a diagnosis. Memory symptoms that are worsening month on month, or that other people notice before you do, belong with a doctor rather than with a guide.

Sources

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