Early Surgical Menopause Linked To Memory, Thinking Skill Declines

Women who undergo surgical menopause at an earlier age may have an increased risk of decline in memory and thinking skills, according to a study that will be presented at the American Academy of Neurology's 65th Annual Meeting in San Diego, March 16 to 23, 2013. Early surgical menopause is the removal of both ovaries before natural menopause and often accompanies a hysterectomy.

"While we found a link between surgical menopause and thinking and memory decline, women on longer hormone replacement therapies had slower declines," said study author Riley Bove, MD, with Harvard Medical School in Boston and a member of the American Academy of Neurology. "Since hormone replacement therapy is widely available, our research raises questions as to whether these therapies have a protective effect against cognitive decline and whether women who experience early surgical menopause should be taking hormone replacement therapies afterward."

The study included 1,837 women between the ages of 53 and 100 participating in the Rush Memory and Aging Project at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. Of those, 33 percent had undergone surgical menopause. The women were given several types of tests that measured thinking skills and memory. Researchers also recorded age at the start of menstruation, years of menstrual cycles and use and length of hormone replacement therapies.

The study found that among women who underwent surgical menopause, earlier age of the procedure was associated with a faster decline in long-term memory related to concepts and ideas, in memory that relates to time and places and in overall thinking abilities. The results stayed the same after considering factors such as age, education and smoking. This same association was not seen in women who underwent natural menopause. There was also a significant association between age at surgical menopause and the plaques linked to Alzheimer's disease.

"Our study warrants further research as the interest in this subject will continue to grow right along with our aging population," said Bove.

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