



Forget Something?

You're not losing it! The fuzzy thinking known as "pregnancy brain" is very common, and it can persist even after you've had the baby. Learn why, and what you can do.

When Bev Smolyansky was pregnant with her daughter, Sophia, she would find herself fumbling for basic words like *pillowcase*. She'd also struggle with simple tasks, such as matching socks while folding laundry. A typical case of pregnancy brain? Yes, except Smolyansky's brain is hardly typical: She has a

Ph.D. in psychology and is the clinical director at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, where she spends her days counseling kids.

Clearly, pregnancy brain can strike even the smartest among us. “About 25 percent of my pregnant and postpartum patients mention feeling scattered, like walking into a room and forgetting what

they came to get,” says Melissa Dugan-Kim, M.D., associate clinical professor at Northwestern Specialists for Women in Chicago. “It’s talked about in culture, but physicians are taught little about why or how often it happens.”

Sometimes, moms-to-be are told they're imagining the problem. But even if pregnancy brain were considered a valid medical condition, people could hold it against women, particularly at work. So what should you do if you feel as if you're going crazy? Take comfort in numbers—and remember this sanity-sparing advice.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Pregnancy brain is still a bit of a head-scratcher. A report in the *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology* reviewed research on the phenomenon and noted close to 80 percent of pregnant women have memory impairment. But the studies didn't test women before and after pregnancy, so researchers couldn't make accurate comparisons. A study in a recent *British Journal of Psychiatry* found no significant cognitive changes in women before, during, and after pregnancy. And the women in these tests didn't *know* they were under observation for pregnancy brain—meaning that they didn't become forgetful as a result of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

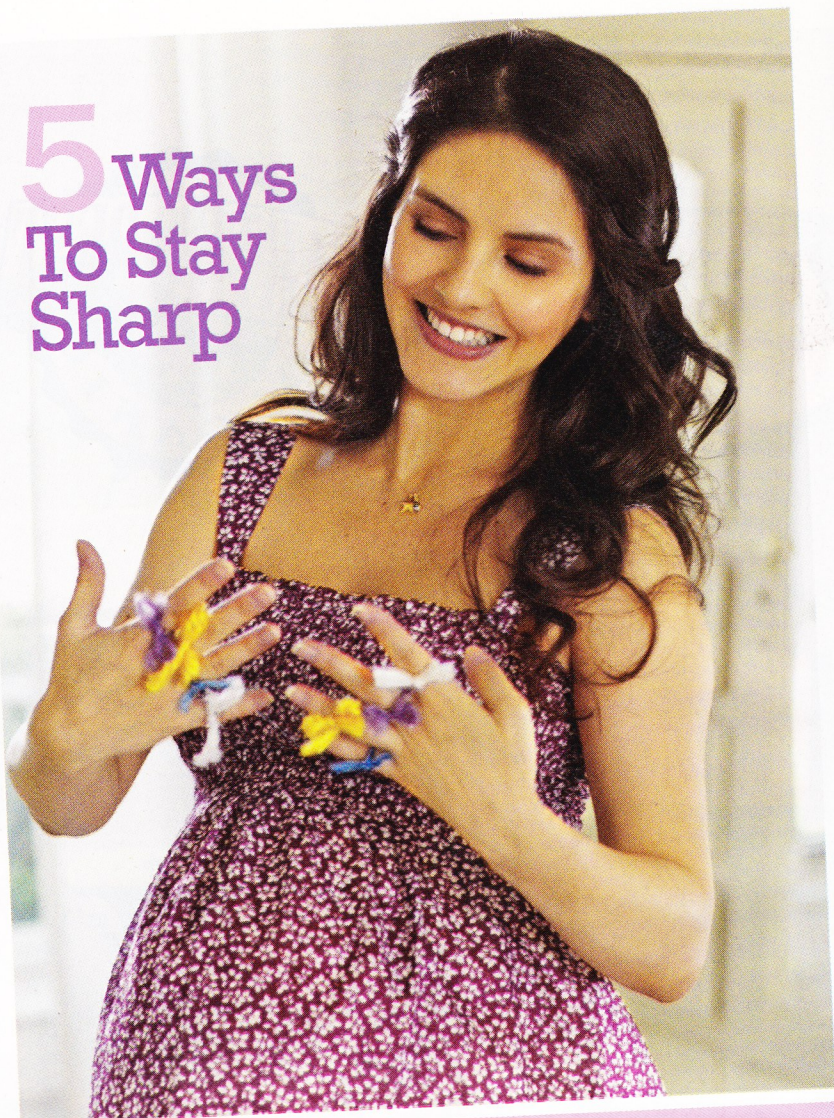
“Pregnant women read about pregnancy brain in guidebooks, so they have a tendency to downgrade their own competency,” notes Helen Christensen, Ph.D., study author and director of the Centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University, in Canberra. “The idea of ‘pregnancy brain’ makes them anxious; this might affect studies’ results.”

Even if women's brain cells don't change during pregnancy, there's good reason to feel scattered or absentminded, continues Christensen. “You've got a lot on your mind when you're pregnant, so your attention gets easily divided. You might not remember every last thing.”

As exciting as pregnancy is, it can be a nerve-racking time. There are doctor visits to keep track of, research to do on baby furniture... and, oh, yes, should you consider natural childbirth? All those concerns can cloud up your head: New research shows that even short-term stress affects memory.

The urge to get it all done before baby arrives may make our brains fuzzy. “Studies show that our brain

5 Ways To Stay Sharp



1 GET ENOUGH SLEEP

“When you don't sleep well your cognition is off,” Dr. Dugan-Kim says. Try to keep a bedtime routine. Do something relaxing, such as reading a book, rather than mind-stimulating, like answering email. If you have a new baby, stick with the tried-but-true advice: Sleep when he does.

4 STAY ACTIVE

Exercise helps you sleep better at night and focus during the day. A new study from the Institute for Memory Impairments and Neurobiological Disorders at the University of California, Irvine, found that memory is sharpest right after a workout; if you exercise regularly, the cognitive benefits can be ongoing.

2 CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE Some women swear by acupuncture to stay sharp during pregnancy. “The theory is that the baby blocks the flow of ‘qi,’ or life force, to our brain,” explains Becca Seitz, a certified acupuncturist in Portland, Oregon. Acupuncture might help restore the flow.

3 MAKE LISTS Put important things down on paper, and be sure to actually *look* at the list throughout the day. It might also help to prepare your to-do list the night before.

5 SURROUND YOURSELF WITH HELPFUL PEOPLE In old times, pregnant women and new moms had an extended network of female kin who could pitch in. Even if you live far from home, try not to go it alone; if you're overwhelmed by shopping for the nursery or need a babysitter, rope in a friend.

is incapable of processing two mental tasks at once," says productivity expert Julie Morgenstern, author of *Never Check Email in the Morning*. When you toggle back and forth between two tasks, it takes your brain four times longer to process what it's working on. "A task that would normally take one tightly focused hour may take four hours," Morgenstern explains. "You have no sense of accomplishment, your energy is depleted, and you have guilt that you're not being productive. Presto! Pregnancy brain."

Slap-happy hormones might also work against us. The first and third trimesters are when most of the hormonal changes occur, exactly when women typically complain of distraction. Progesterone shoots way up early on in pregnancy and stays high throughout the nine months. "An abundance of progesterone isn't



Don't fret: The effects aren't permanent. Your keys will stop escaping you.

the baby when she's born," says University of California, San Francisco, neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine, M.D., author of *The Female Brain*. Your

brain is laying the groundwork that lets you, say, tune into a newborn's cries. Those shifting gears might make some women forgetful. The effect may endure even after your baby's arrival, fueled by hormones produced during breastfeeding.

Increased estrogen doesn't help, either. "These hormones cause circuits to grow—they turn on all kinds of programs that prepare your system to focus on

good for women's memory," says Abbe Macbeth, Ph.D., postdoctoral fellow at the National Institute of Mental Health. It's thought to reduce anxiety, but in high doses, it can mellow out your brain and make it a bit mushy.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

As unnerving as Swiss-cheese brain can be, your mind will bounce back. For now, your best tactic is to avoid

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Making It Work at Work

Even if you're feeling forgetful, avoid discussing it. "Women are more likely to put that 'ditz' label on themselves," notes Karol Rose, chief knowledge officer for FlexPains, a company that helps women figure out flexible work solutions. Joke about your disorganized thinking and your boss may believe you.

Small tweaks to your schedule could help to reduce stress. Rose says, for example, if commuting during rush hour is too much for you, ask your boss to come in a few minutes later and leave a few minutes later or maybe work at home one day a week.

And if you do make a mistake, acknowledge it and move on. "I think women are too quick to put themselves down or explain away mistakes," says therapist Bev Smolvankey.

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