

# Women's way with words could mask early signs of dementia

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Women outscored men on memory tests even as their brains showed the first signs of dementia SHIRONOSOV/GETTY IMAGES

The early signs of dementia are being missed in women because their verbal skills are better, a study has suggested.

Women outscored men on memory tests even as their brains showed the first signs of deterioration, researchers found.

While the results suggest that years of better linguistic ability could make the female brain more resilient against dementia, they also mean that for many women a diagnosis of dementia could be delayed.

Scientists suggested that tests could be structured differently to ensure that symptoms in female patients are spotted quickly. Doctors increasingly believe that the key to treating the disease will be halting it in the early stages. Two thirds of the estimated 850,000 people with dementia in Britain are women, and experts said too little was understood about gender differences in the effects of the condition.

The researchers gave memory tests to 254 people with Alzheimer's, 672 with earlier stage mild cognitive impairment and 390 with no thinking problems. The participants were also given brain scans to assess how well they metabolised glucose: difficulty in taking up a key source of energy is a sign of problems in brain cells.

Women outperformed men with the same level of brain deterioration, scientists report in the journal *Neurology*. Their scores fell to worrying levels only when their brain metabolism rate was 15-20 per cent lower than men scoring the same.

Erin Sundermann, who carried out the study at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, said: "Women perform better than men on tests of verbal memory throughout life, which may give them a buffer of protection against losing their verbal memory skills in the precursor stages of Alzheimer's disease, known as mild cognitive impairment. This is especially important because verbal memory tests are used to diagnose people with Alzheimer's disease and mild cognitive impairment, so women may not be diagnosed until they are further along in the disease.

"These results suggest that women are better able to compensate for underlying changes in the brain with their

‘cognitive reserve’ until the disease reaches a more advanced stage,” Dr Sundermann added.

Rosa Sancho of Alzheimer’s Research UK said: “While this study only represents one snapshot in time and doesn’t provide insight into how or why men and women’s memory performance changes over time, it highlights the potential importance of gender differences in understanding dementia.”

Doug Brown, director of research and development at Alzheimer’s Society, said: “With dementia disproportionately affecting women, understanding how better language skills might be masking the effects of the condition could help doctors to better spot the early warning signs.”