

Resource

Brain fog and rheumatoid arthritis

Brain fog is a common term used to describe anything that affects your ability to think clearly. This is your 'cognitive function'. It is not a medical term or diagnosis.

Print



At a glance

Brain fog is a common term used to describe anything that affects your ability to think clearly.

Symptoms

Symptoms of brain fog may include:

- Forgetfulness
- Confusion
- Losing your train of thought
- Difficulty concentrating, especially for long periods of time
- Forgetting words, names or facts that you would usually be able to recall with ease
- Mental exhaustion

Brain fog and RA

Some of the most common causes of brain fog in RA include:

- Pain
- Fatigue
- Lack of sleep/poor sleep
- Medication: Some RA medicines can have side effects linked to brain fog. These include confusion and mood changes.
- Chronic inflammation
- Stress

Other common causes of brain fog

It is important to understand that brain fog has many potential causes outside of RA, including:

- Various health conditions, including long covid
- Conditions with symptoms which can cause or worsen brain fog, such as pain and fatigue
- Conditions that affect the brain. This includes dementia/ Alzheimer's and neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD or ASD
- Mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression
- Hormonal changes, for example during pregnancy, menopause and perimenopause
- Poor diet or vitamin deficiencies
- Medication for other conditions
- Sleep disorders/difficulties with sleep.
- Age: A certain level of decline in speed of thought is common as we get older

Treatment

Think of the causes of brain fog that you have some control over, such as:

- Reducing fatigue
- Improving quality of sleep

- Eating a healthy, balanced diet
- Exercising
- Managing your RA
- Reducing stress

Tips for living with brain fog

- Get organised
- Break big tasks down into smaller steps
- Use technology to help you remember to do tasks
- Share the load
- Take breaks

Symptoms of brain fog

Brain fog describes a feeling you may get when thought processes are slower or less clear ('foggy'). People experiencing this sensation may also describe feeling 'fuzzy headed' or 'sluggish'.

Symptoms of brain fog may include:

- Forgetfulness
- Confusion
- Losing your train of thought
- Difficulty concentrating, especially for long periods of time
- Forgetting words, names or facts that you would usually be able to recall with ease
- Mental exhaustion

The impact of brain fog

Brain fog can be embarrassing. An inability to answer a simple question might make you feel 'stupid' or 'silly'. Forgetting an important task or appointment may make you feel that you have let people down. You may also feel frustrated to be struggling with things you used to find easy.

The way that other people respond to the way your brain fog may also affect you. A partner may feel that you didn't listen to them or remember what they said to you. A friend might get annoyed that you forgot a social engagement. Your boss may think you aren't putting the effort in at work.

RA occurs when a process in the body (your immune system) is not working properly. In a similar way, brain fog also occurs when a process in the body (your ability to think) is not working properly. The effects that RA symptoms have on your brain are no less real than the physical effects they have on your body. You should not feel ashamed by symptoms of either your body or brain.

Brain fog can be scary, especially if you don't know why it is happening or worry about what might be causing it.

Brain fog and RA

There are many reasons why brain fog is common in people with RA. It is often caused by a combination of factors, which may not all be RA related. Some of the most common causes of brain fog in RA include:

- Pain
- Fatigue
- Lack of sleep/poor sleep
- Medication: Some RA medicines can have side effects linked to brain fog. These include confusion and mood changes.
- Chronic inflammation
- Stress

Other common causes of brain fog

It is important to understand that brain fog has many potential causes outside of RA.

If you have concerns about the level of brain fog you are experiencing, speak to your GP. This is especially important if symptoms get worse or affect daily function.

Causes of brain fog other than your RA may include:

- Various health conditions, including long covid
- Conditions with symptoms which can cause or worsen brain fog, such as pain and fatigue
- Conditions that affect the brain. This includes dementia/ Alzheimer's and neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD or ASD
- Mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression
- Hormonal changes, for example during pregnancy, menopause and perimenopause
- Poor diet or vitamin deficiencies
- Medication for other conditions
- Sleep disorders/difficulties with sleep.
- Age: A certain level of decline in speed of thought is common as we get older

How do I know what's causing my brain fog?

It is not an easy task to find out what is causing or contributing to brain fog, but timing may offer you some clues. Think about when you first started to notice brain fog. What changes had happened in your life at around the same time? Did it start around the time you started a medication or first noticed your RA symptoms? Did it start during a period of stress or poor sleep, or around the onset of menopause?

How to treat brain fog

It is likely that there are many factors contributing to your brain fog. Think about the factors that are within your control to improve. This may not remove the fog completely but is likely to improve it. Exercise, diet and sleep are great places to start.

Fatigue and sleep

Reducing fatigue and improving your quality of sleep can reduce brain fog.

[Article](#)

[Rheumatoid arthritis and fatigue](#)

[Fatigue is one of the most common and can be one of the most debilitating symptoms of RA. It is a level of tiredness which cannot always be eased through getting a good night's sleep, and it can have a major impact on day-to-day living.](#)

Eat a healthy diet

Eating a healthy, balanced diet can improve your brain function

[Article](#)

[Diet](#)

[There is a huge amount of dietary advice aimed at people with RA. This article summarises some of the dietary advice for which there is evidence of benefit for people with RA.](#)

Exercise

Exercise is very important. It can improve brain function and mental health and help you to sleep better.

[Article](#)

[Exercise for rheumatoid arthritis](#)

[Exercise is important because it helps reduce the risk of further joint damage. It also helps by reducing pain and the risk of heart disease and by improving muscle strength and mental wellbeing. There are exercises for people at all stages of their RA journey.](#)

Reduce stress

Stress has a big impact on our minds and our bodies. Reducing levels of stress and anxiety can



[Web link](#)

[Stress Matters](#)

[Our Stress Matters booklet explores what stress is and gives tips on how it can be managed.](#)

Manage your RA

Brain fog is likely caused, at least in part, by the symptoms of your RA. Controlling your RA and its symptoms can in turn reduce brain fog.

Hormonal changes

Brain fog is common during pregnancy, perimenopause and menopause. When it occurs during and for a period after pregnancy, it is sometimes referred to as 'baby brain'. Lack of sleep during this time can also make it very hard for your brain to function. These effects are temporary, but that doesn't mean you should put up with them. Get support from friends and family, rest when you can and try not to take on more than you have to. Use the tips below to help you to get through brain fog during pregnancy and while caring for a baby.

Perimenopause and menopause can last for several years. The type and severity of symptoms will vary from person to person, with brain fog being one of the most common. Anything that helps improve menopause symptoms can also improve levels of brain fog. This includes treatment with hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

How to live with brain fog

Brain fog is often temporary. It can have short term causes, such as a bad night's sleep, after which it may only last for a day. In more long-term cases it can last for anything from days to years. It may be constant, or it may come and go. During long-term periods of brain fog, there are many ways to help you to lessen the impact this has on your life. Here are some tips to help you make brain fog more manageable:

Get organised

When your brain feels 'foggy' it can be hard to keep on top of things. Find ways to reduce your mental load by using organisation techniques that work for you.

Physical organisation involves creating a tidy and organised environment and belongings. Keeping your home and work settings organised makes it less easy for you to mislay items.

Mental organisation involves strategies that aid your ability to think clearly. This may include post-it notes and alarms as reminders. To do lists can help you to prioritise and complete tasks and improve your motivation.

Break big tasks up into smaller steps

If you feel overwhelmed and unsure of where to start with a big task, try breaking it up into smaller steps. Make a list of these steps and try to work out the most logical order to do them in.

Use technology

There are many apps and devices that can help minimise the effects of brain fog. Keep track of important dates and events by using a calendar in your phone. Using a shared household calendar can avoid you double booking. Set alarms on your phone or on virtual assistant devices, such as Alexa, to help you to keep track of time. Manage 'to do' lists and shopping lists in phone apps.

Share the load

If brain fog is making some of your responsibilities more difficult, ask for help. See if anyone can take on or share these tasks.

Take breaks

Brain fog can make simple tasks take longer to complete. A natural response to this can be to work harder for longer to stay on track, but this can make the situation worse. If your brain is already overloaded, regular breaks are better than trying to keep going.

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[Article](#)

[Depression and rheumatoid arthritis](#)

[Depression is more common in people with RA than in the general public. People sometimes say they feel depressed when they really mean they feel a bit low. There is a difference, so how do you know if](#)



[Web link](#)

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