

The Connection Between HEARING LOSS and ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Please join us in raising awareness of the link between hearing loss and dementia by encouraging your patients to get their hearing tested during World Alzheimer's Month in September. Let's do all we can to spread the word on how addressing hearing loss can help people stay socially connected and mentally fit.

Thanks for taking part!

Studies have shown that maintaining strong social connections and keeping mentally active as we age might lower the risk of cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease. Research shows that those who address their hearing loss are more likely to be socially active -- while individuals who suffer untreated hearing loss become more socially withdrawn and are considerably less likely to participate in social activities.

A pair of studies out of Johns Hopkins found that hearing loss is associated with accelerated cognitive decline in older adults and that seniors with hearing loss are significantly more likely to develop dementia over time than those who retain their hearing. A third Johns Hopkins study revealed a link between hearing loss and accelerated brain tissue loss. The researchers found that for older adults with hearing loss, brain tissue loss happens faster than it does for those with normal hearing.

When the sensory stimulation is reduced due to hearing loss, the cognitive load is stressed. Older adults with hearing loss are more likely to develop problems thinking and remembering than older adults whose hearing is normal. Levels of declining brain function were directly related to the amount of hearing loss. Generally speaking, even those with just mild hearing loss are 2x more likely to develop dementia than those with normal hearing; moderate hearing losses are 3x more likely, and severe hearing losses are 4x more likely. Possible explanations for this progressive risk include the ties between hearing loss and social isolation, with loneliness being well established in previous research as a risk factor for cognitive decline. Degraded hearing may also force the brain to devote too much of its energy to processing sound, at the expense of energy that would otherwise be devoted to memory and thinking.

Unaddressed hearing loss not only affects the listener's ability to "hear" the sound accurately, but it also affects higher-level cognitive functioning. One study found that older adults with just mild-to-moderate hearing loss performed poorer on cognitive tests than those of the same age who had good hearing. Researchers also used MRI to look at the effect that hearing loss has on both brain activity and structure. The study found that people with poorer hearing had less gray matter in the auditory cortex, a region of the brain that is necessary to support speech comprehension.

According to senior study investigator and Johns Hopkins otologist and epidemiologist Frank Lin, M.D., Ph.D., "Our results show that hearing loss should not be considered an inconsequential part of aging, because it may come with some serious long-term consequences to healthy brain functioning." He estimates that as many as 27 million Americans over age 50, including two-thirds of men and women aged 70 years and older, suffer from some form of hearing loss. More worrisome is that only 15 percent of those who need a hearing aid get one, leaving much of the problem and its consequences untreated. "Our findings emphasize just how important it is for physicians to discuss hearing with their patients and to be proactive in addressing any hearing declines over time," says Lin.

