

Hearing Loss & Dementia

How Hearing Plays an Important Role in Brain Health

Facts & Stats

- Hearing loss is associated with a 30–40% accelerated rate of cognitive decline, and a 24% increased risk of cognitive impairment compared to normal hearing¹
- Compared to those with normal hearing, individuals with a mild, moderate, and severe hearing loss have a 2-, 3-, and 5-fold increased risk of dementia²
- Untreated hearing loss may be associated with cognitive decline through social isolation and loneliness. Numerous studies^{3, 4, 5} have demonstrated social isolation as a recognized risk factor for cognitive decline and dementia
- When speech is garbled or unclear due to hearing loss, greater cognitive resources are required for auditory processing at the expense of other brain functions, such as working memory.⁶ This strain of decoding sounds over many years may overwhelm the brain, leaving the individual more susceptible to dementia
- Hearing rehabilitative therapies and devices may lessen cognitive load, provide increased auditory stimulation, and promote social engagement⁷
- Investigators have pointed out that reducing cognitive decline and delaying the onset of dementia even slightly could lead to billions of dollars in healthcare savings and improve the quality of life of millions of older adults⁸

What You Can Do To Help

While evidence of the effects of hearing treatment on dementia have not yet been completed, new research shows reduced cognitive decline in those with hearing aids compared to those without hearing aids after age 50, as shown on a measurement of cognitive decline.⁹ Furthermore, the benefits of early screening and management of hearing loss are significant and without risk. There is considerable data that suggest hearing aids can reduce the social isolation, depression, and anxiety that untreated hearing loss can cause.¹⁰ Furthermore, hearing aids have been found to reduce effortful listening for people with hearing loss, which may decrease cognitive load.

Addressing hearing loss should not be an afterthought but treated more proactively to deter inherent effects it has on cognition. All adults over the age of 55 should be referred for a diagnostic Audiological Evaluation. The earlier hearing loss is diagnosed, the earlier it can be treated. Patients with dementia should be encouraged to be screened for hearing loss as part of any assessment of cognitive function. If a hearing loss is found, assistive technology such as hearing aids can make a big difference in improving the essential cognitive functions, and overall quality of life.

References

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