

HEARING LOSS AND DEMENTIA: EXPLAINING THE LINK

By Lorrie Matarazzo

Many people assume that hearing loss is simply an inconsequential part of ageing. Research, however, over this past decade suggests that it may play a much more critical role in brain health than we've previously thought. Hearing loss is linked to many other health issues, one being an increased risk of dementia. Current research attempts to help us understand this link better.



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One theory that exists is that of brain changes over time. That is, hearing loss has been found to cause changes in the brain, which increase the risk of dementia. When the hearing part of our brain grows inactive, it results in tissue loss and changes to brain structure. Studies show that the brain of individuals with untreated hearing loss shrink or atrophy more quickly than those of people with normal hearing. Like other parts of our body, our brain needs to be worked and stimulated in order to remain active.

Another theory that often is cited relates to brain overload. When it is difficult to hear, the brain uses up much more of its resources to understand what people are saying. Straining to hear throughout the day depletes one's mental energy. We refer to this as auditory fatigue. This extra effort required to hear steals the necessary brainpower needed for other critical cognitive tasks such as remembering. By putting all our resources into hearing something, it often can't get stored in our memory.

The final theory linking hearing loss and dementia is social isolation. People with untreated hearing loss are less likely to join organized and casual social activities. When a person begins to withdraw from being socially connected to others, the risk for dementia intensifies. In short, the less we stimulate our brain by interacting with others and the less we use our brain to hear and listen, the more quickly our brain declines, ultimately putting us at a higher risk for dementia.

The research in this area is ongoing. We have learned that the higher the degree of untreated hearing loss, the greater the risk of dementia. As hearing loss increases, generally, the brain has been without regular sound stimulation for many years.

Hearing checks are an essential part of our health. Like many other components of our healthcare, early intervention generally leads to more successful outcomes. If you would like further information regarding hearing loss and dementia or would like a hearing health check, please contact an audiologist.