

NOW HEAR THIS!

HEARING WELLNESS CENTER

HEARING LOSS AND DEMENTIA

I love the sound of the birds singing ... but not when it wakes me in the morning. Not all sounds are good sounds, but what happens if hearing loss is significant enough that we don't understand what others are saying?

According to the article "Can hearing aids help with cognitive decline?" by Starkey Hearing, a growing body of research has shown that hearing loss plays a role in our ability to stay mentally sharp as we age. In fact, a 2018 review of the research concluded untreated hearing loss increased the risk of dementia by 50%.

We all want to maintain our mental sharpness as we get older. Dementia, Alzheimer's and cognitive decline are conditions everyone hopes to avoid. While researchers admit the science is still inconclusive on exactly why untreated hearing loss increases dementia risk, they do offer three probable reasons.

1. Hearing loss leads to social isolation - Untreated hearing loss has long been linked to social isolation and loneliness, which studies have shown increases the risk of Alzheimer's and dementia. Think about it. If you struggle to hear, you'll be more likely to withdraw from social activities or situations where hearing plays a big role.
2. Hearing loss shifts your cognitive load - As listening becomes more difficult, your brain has to work harder to register and comprehend what you're hearing. This steals energy needed for memory and thinking. Scientists refer to this as the "cognitive load theory". Imagine your brain as having a finite amount of fuel. As hearing loss increases, you use more "fuel" to make sense of what you're listening to, meaning you have less fuel for tasks like memory and decision-making.
3. Finally, hearing loss is shown to accelerate brain atrophy or shrinkage. Yes, believe it or not our brains shrink as we age. But researchers at John's Hopkins found that people who are hard of hearing lost more brain tissue per year than peers with normal hearing - likely due to atrophy from lack of stimulation.

So, can treating hearing loss help keep us mentally sharp? A 2017 study suggests this is true. The Lancet Commission on Dementia Prevention and Care, concluded that managing or treating hearing loss in mid-life is one of nine things you can do to help prevent dementia. And - more importantly - it was the number one risk factor they recommended you could modify to "reduce the incidence of dementia or substantially delay its onset".

In 2015 another group studied subjects over a 25 year period and found that those with self-reported hearing loss who did not wear hearing aids showed evidence of accelerated cognitive decline, while those with hearing loss who did wear hearing aids had no more cognitive decline than their normal-hearing peers.

In fact, researchers suggest that hearing loss treatment "could prevent up to 9 percent of the more than 47 million dementia cases in the world".

