

Dementia and Hearing Loss

Hearing loss and dementia are associated with ageing and may occur together as people get older. Hearing loss can be mistaken for dementia or make the symptoms of dementia appear worse.¹

What are the common symptoms of dementia?

Dementia is characterised by a deterioration in a person's cognitive abilities with symptoms such as:²

- Memory loss
- Confusion
- Difficulty with thinking and decision making
- Decline in skills needed for everyday living
- Changes in ways of communicating [e.g. repeating what has been said]¹

What are the common symptoms of hearing loss?

- Difficulty hearing other people clearly
- Difficulty hearing in noisy situations (e.g. in restaurants or a shopping centre)
- Difficulty following conversations involving more than 2 people
- Asking people to repeat themselves and/or talk more slowly
- Reading other people's lips when speaking to you
- Having the volume for TV higher than what other people need¹

What is the link between dementia and hearing loss?

The link between hearing loss and dementia is closer than what people may think. Multiple studies show that hearing loss can be linked to the onset of dementia or Alzheimer's disease. It is widely accepted that leaving hearing loss untreated can be a risk factor for the onset of these diseases in older populations, and that this risk has yet to be conveyed effectively to the general public.

It is generally accepted that the more severe the hearing loss and the greater the length of time the hearing has been left untreated, the higher the likelihood for dementia in older patients.



Examination of the ear³

What does this link mean?

One research study in particular found that mild, moderate, and severe hearing losses made the odds of dementia 2, 3, and 5 times, respectively, more likely over the following 10-plus years. Untreated hearing loss is mostly likely linked with reduced earnings, increased workplace absenteeism, lower workplace productivity, depression, anxiety and cognitive decline.

Researchers are not completely sure how hearing loss and cognitive decline are connected, but highlight that there are other factors involved. People with hearing loss can experience a decrease in social contact and a sense of isolation. Various research has found that a lack of social contact can be as significant a factor in the onset of dementia as hearing loss.

What can be done?

Early diagnosis and treatment of hearing loss may be effective in slowing the onset of Alzheimer's disease or dementia. As evidence continues to mount that hearing loss is a contributing factor to these types of cognitive decline, it is important to be aware of the profound consequences involved in ignoring or not treating hearing loss.

On average, people wait seven years from the time their hearing loss is diagnosed until they seek treatment, even though the sooner they begin treatment the better the outcomes. The provision of hearing aids will not only benefit hearing, it will also improve the quality of life and may be the key to preventing loss of brain cells and cognitive dysfunction.

It is advised to get routine hearing checks especially in mid-life and older age.⁴ If someone is experiencing hearing loss or dementia, it is recommended that they discuss with their GP who will then refer them to an appropriate medical professional for further investigation such as an audiologist, ENT specialist and geriatrician.

References

1. Maheswaran V. Why and how are dementia and hearing loss linked? [Internet]. London: Action on hearing loss; 2017 [updated 2017 Aug 3; cited 2018 Feb 15]. Available from: <https://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/live-well/our-community/our-blog/why-a-nd-how-are-dementia-and-hearing-loss-linked/>
2. Gordon A. The connection between hearing loss and dementia [Internet]. New York: Hearing Health Foundation; 2017 [updated 2017 Jun 13; cited 2018 Feb 15]. Available from: <https://hearinghealthfoundation.org/blogs/connection-hearing-loss-dementia>
3. Victorian Hearing. Our hearing clinic services. [Image on internet]. [cited 2018 Mar 24]. Available from: <http://www.victorianhearing.com.au/>
4. Alzheimer's Society. Study suggests links between hearing loss and dementia [internet]. London: Alzheimer's Society; 2017 [updated 2017 Dec 7; cited 2018 Feb 15]. Available from: <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/news/article/281/study-suggests-links-between-hearing-loss-and-dementia-alzheimers-society-comment>