

Script – Print – Diabetes and hearing loss

There are many health complications for people living with diabetes including heart and kidney disease, oral health and vision problems. You can add hearing loss to the list.

According to Chris Workman, AuD, an audiologist with OSF HealthCare, people with diabetes are twice as likely to suffer from hearing loss compared to those who don't. Even people with prediabetes have a 30% higher rate of hearing loss than people with normal blood sugar levels.

"There's about 28 million people in the United States with hearing loss," Dr. Workman says. "There's 37 million people with diabetes. So, we can surmise that there's a good portion of that 28 million who have diabetes that also have hearing loss."

The link appears to be nerve damage. All senses rely on good blood flow and nerve function. Dr. Workman says blood vessels feed the nerves, which are crucial to good hearing. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the average person is born with about 16,000 hair cells within their inner ear, which allow your brain to detect sounds. By the time most people notice a change in their hearing, 30% to 50% of hair cells have already been damaged or destroyed. And they do not grow back.

"I believe high blood sugar could potentially affect the blood flow to the inner ear and some of the hair cells which could affect and cause some hearing loss," Dr. Workman says. "Low blood sugar could cause some damage to the nerve and transmission of the hearing."

Dr. Workman adds that for the past 10-15 years the audiology field has seen a rise in patients who also have diabetes – including in his own practice. For those patients, especially those who have other comorbidities such as hypertension, screening tests are especially important.

"For those patients, we would recommend following up with an annual hearing test to keep an eye on things," he says, "We encourage them to diet, exercise and take their medication as needed to get better control of diabetes. Otherwise, they're prone to potential hearing loss and more severe loss."

There are many signs of hearing loss.

- Ringing in the ears
- A tendency to assume everyone is mumbling
- Difficulty understanding what people are saying
- Needing to turn the TV volume up high
- Struggling to hear in group settings

Dr. Workman encourages patients to talk with their primary care physician to establish a hearing baseline. He also recommends stopping smoking and avoiding frequent exposure to loud noises. In addition to physical changes, hearing loss can also lead to depression or feeling secluded, which can impact your social life and mental health.

The month of May is National Speech-Language-Hearing Month. It's a time which raises the importance of taking care of your hearing.

Dr. Workman says the key to better outcomes is early treatment. "I think raising awareness of hearing loss not only impacts the individual with the hearing loss, but impacts family, friends, coworkers. If we can raise that awareness and get them help sooner, we're going to continue their quality of life and transition easier to any type of treatment."

For more information on hearing loss, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).