

How hearing loss can impact brain health

Many people assume hearing loss is simply a normal part of getting older. While age-related hearing loss is common, experts say it's not something to be ignored.

According to Emily Cooper, AuD, a clinical audiologist and audiology supervisor with OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute, researchers continue to learn more about the relationship between hearing loss and dementia.

"Over the last 10 years, there have been more and more studies linking hearing loss with dementia. There's a growing body of research showing that not only is there a link, but that untreated hearing loss is more of a risk for cognitive decline," Dr. Cooper says.

While researchers are still working to understand exactly why hearing loss and dementia appear to be connected, Dr. Cooper emphasizes that hearing loss alone does not cause dementia. Instead, untreated hearing loss may contribute to factors that increase the risk of cognitive decline over time.

One possible reason is the impact hearing loss can have on a person's social life. Individuals who struggle to hear often withdraw from conversations, social gatherings and activities they once enjoyed.

"Your brain needs to be active and used," Dr. Cooper stresses. "Hearing loss also takes a lot of brain power. Your brain is having to do a lot more processing to understand the world." Over time, that increased effort may contribute to cognitive decline.

Recognizing the signs of hearing loss

Hearing loss can develop gradually, making it difficult for people to recognize when their hearing has changed. Dr. Cooper says some common warning signs include:

- Turning up the television louder than usual
- Frequently asking others to repeat themselves
- Saying "what?" or "huh?" more often during conversations
- Having more difficulty hearing in noisy environments, such as restaurants or crowded events
- Experiencing ringing in the ears, known as tinnitus

Because these changes often happen slowly, family members are sometimes the first to notice them.

Dr. Cooper says loved ones can play an important role by encouraging hearing evaluations in a supportive way. Rather than focusing on the hearing loss itself, she recommends emphasizing quality of life and participation in important moments.

For example, family members might say they want their loved one to fully participate in family gatherings or clearly hear conversations during medical appointments.

Don't wait to get your hearing checked

Many people postpone hearing evaluations for years, assuming hearing loss is inevitable or waiting until their golden years.

"Getting treated early is going to be the most beneficial in preventing cognitive decline as it relates to hearing loss," Dr. Cooper says. "That means getting your hearing tested early, not waiting until you're 65 and on Medicare to do so. Even in your 40s and 50s, there's research that shows even mild hearing loss in your 40s and 50s can lead to cognitive decline later in life."

She encourages adults to establish baseline hearing assessments as they age, just as they monitor other aspects of their health.

A good first step is discussing hearing concerns with a primary care provider, who can then provide a referral to an audiologist for a comprehensive hearing evaluation.

A growing concern for an aging population

The importance of hearing health is becoming even more significant as the nation's population ages.

By 2030, all Baby Boomers will be over the age of 65 according to the [United States Census Bureau](#). Dr. Cooper says this creates a larger risk for both hearing loss and dementia.

"We're looking at massive numbers of an aging population and people who could be at a risk for dementia and hearing loss," Dr. Cooper says. "As a field, we are looking at educating people to get their hearing tested early and getting treated early."

Research in [Oxford Academic's Age and Ageing journal](#) suggests that individuals who receive treatment for hearing loss may have a lower risk of cognitive decline than those who leave hearing loss untreated.

Treatment options vary based on the severity of hearing loss and may include hearing aids or cochlear implants. While Medicare does not currently cover hearing aids, cochlear implants are covered by Medicare and many other insurance plans.

For Dr. Cooper, the message is straightforward: hearing loss should not be viewed as something people simply have to accept. Identifying hearing loss early and seeking treatment may help individuals stay engaged, connected and cognitively healthy as they age.

If you have concerns about your hearing, speak with your [primary care provider](#) who can help talk through options with you.