

Johns Hopkins: Hearing Problems Could Lead to Dementia

Seniors who suffer hearing loss are at a higher risk of developing dementia, according to new research by Frank Lin, M.D., an otolaryngologist and epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

“Compared to individuals with normal hearing, people with mild, moderate, and severe hearing loss, respectively, had a two-three- and five- fold increased risk of developing dementia,” he told Newsmax Health.

And aside from the greater dementia risk, he found that those with hearing problems lost their cognitive skills faster than others—about 35 percent faster. The worse the hearing loss, the faster the rate of cognitive decline, Dr. Lin found.

Social Isolation

He theorizes that two causal factors prevail. Like many Alzheimer’s experts, he pinpoints social isolation as one.

“When you can’t hear the person across from you, you won’t be engaged in conversation,” says Dr. Lin. This social withdrawal leads to loneliness, which many studies have shown increases dementia risk.

Another cause may be cognitive overload. When the brain expends so much energy trying to decipher garbled words, it diminishes other cognitive functions.

Hearing Aids: Mixed Blessing

Unfortunately, hearing aids aren’t always the answer. For some people, adapting to traditional hearing aids—which can boost

ambient noise—adds to the frustration of not being able to hear people speak.

David Myers, author of *A Quiet World: Living with Hearing Loss*, is an advocate of “hearing loops” that remove the unwanted background noise often associated with traditional hearing devices.

“The new digital technology that comes in many of the new hearing aids literally changed my life,” said Myers, a psychologist and creator of the non-profit informational website, . “When I worship or attend lectures in campus auditoriums, the PA sound system is sent magnetically to my hearing aids which deliver a crystal clear voice,” he says.

What You Can Do

Gary Small, M.D., director of UCLA Longevity Center and co-author of *The Alzheimer’s Prevention Program*, tells Newsmax Health that of the approximately 48 million Americans who suffer hearing loss, nearly 20 percent are between the ages of 45 and 64. By the age of 75 and older, 47 percent report such loss.

“I believe that this strong link between hearing loss and cognitive decline is due to social isolation and the accompanying stress, but there are steps you can take to help yourself or a loved one,” he says.

“My own father suffered from hearing loss and became frustrated and stressed in public places,” reveals Dr. Small, author of *The Mind Health Report* newsletter. “So every Sunday I would visit him in his home and we’d do crossword puzzles together.

“It’s important to be sensitive to people’s needs and limitations. If someone you know has a hearing loss, invite them to a quiet dinner at home instead of a noise-filled restaurant.”

Quiet Mind, Strong Brain

Dharma Singh Kalsa, M.D., of the Alzheimer's Research and Prevention Foundation in Tucson, says that lifestyle changes can build brainpower and thwart the cognitive overload that comes with hearing loss.

"Slow down," he says. "We need to return to what I call 'turtle health.' By slowing down we help keep brain cells healthier. Adopt a heart and therefore brain healthy diet and exercise daily. Take appropriate supplements and learn to meditate. We have studies that prove that daily meditation increases blood flow to the brain and can reverse memory loss."

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