

Greater risk for dementia with untreated hearing loss]

By Brian Lockhart

Global research is pointing to untreated hearing loss as a growing risk for developing dementia.

In 2017, the Lance Commission included hearing loss in its list of major modifiable risk factors for dementia. How hearing loss increases the risk of dementia isn't fully understood.

A study published in 2017 suggested untreated hearing loss increases the load on the brain by redirecting sounds to puzzle-solving and memory parts of the brain rather than the speech interpretation section of the brain.

A 2020 study went further saying the brain may stop using those areas usually engaged with interpreting sound leading to these areas shrinking or degenerating. This could effectively alter the structure of the brain.

A 12-year study at Johns Hopkins Medicine in the U.S. used Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to discover increased brain atrophy when hearing loss is present. The researchers found that when the brain received a distorted or unintelligible message, whether from poor hearing or interfering background noise, the sections of the brain related to reasoning, decision-making and memory, were activated and they got overloaded.

The same study found that untreated hearing loss dramatically increases the risk of dementia development. For those with mild hearing loss, the risk is doubled.

In people with moderate hearing loss, the risk is tripled, and for those with severe hearing loss, the risk is five times greater for developing dementia.

‘The challenge is hearing loss can sneak up on you,’ explained John Tiede, hearing instrument specialist and co-CEO of Hear Well Be Well hearing health clinics. ‘The changes to your hearing can be so gradual you don't notice them. For most people with hearing loss, it wasn't a dramatic change that happened suddenly. As a result, hearing loss can go undiagnosed and untreated for years.’

Mr. Tied explained that for many people, it can take decades before they decide to get diagnosed and treated.

‘When people lose their hearing overnight, that's so dramatic and frightening that people generally get a hearing test immediately,’ Mr. Tiede said. ‘But for those with age-related hearing loss or who've had gradual damage done to their ears from loud environments, illness, medications or music, the beginning is subtle. They develop coping mechanisms to avoid getting a hearing test or choosing to wear hearing aids. Family members are often the ones who really notice the difference and are also the ones who nudge the person with hearing loss to get tested.’

A recent study published only weeks ago in JAMA Neurology, found that hearing aids can reduce the risk of developing dementia by 19 per cent.

‘Hearing tests are painless and take about an hour,’ Mr. Tiede explained. ‘And at least at Hear Well Be Well, the hearing tests are free. I don't fully understand people's reluctance to get their hearing tested, particularly in the face of this kind of research. If a hearing test and hearing aids can help reduce the risk, I feel it's at least worth a conversation.’

Hear Well Be Well, which has an Alliston location, has been helping people with their hearing health for over 35 years, and is an independent, family-run hearing aid business.