

# Hearing Loss & Dementia

In 2018 the BBC reported on a study in the Lancet, published in the February Archives of Neurology, which was presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference in London. This international study stated that, "one in three cases of dementia could be prevented if more people looked after their brain health throughout life."

It lists nine factors that contribute to the risk of dementia, which if addressed, could lower the risk of onset or the severity of the condition. The first of these risk factors, and the one with the highest score is mid-life hearing loss, responsible for 9% of the overall risk. Other things included smoking 5%, physical inactivity 3% and high blood pressure 2%. Hearing loss often leads to social isolation and depression, which are also on the list, responsible between them for 6% of the overall risk. **So, hearing loss has been identified as a significant risk factor in determining a person's potential for acquiring dementia.**

Over the years there have been other research papers suggesting a strong link between untreated hearing loss and dementia. A paper published in 2014 by Dr Frank Lin of Baltimore, also involved with the study above, stated: "those who began the study with hearing loss, severe enough to interfere with conversation, were 24% more likely than those with normal hearing to see their cognitive abilities diminish."

This clearly suggests that hearing loss seems to speed up age-related cognitive decline. It was also shown that the greater the hearing loss, the greater that chance. Of those with a hearing loss regarded as moderate to severe, 62% developed dementia. Dr Lin reported that for every 10 decibels of hearing loss, the likelihood of developing dementia jumped by 27%. Of those participating in the study who were 60 or older, 36% of the dementia risk was recorded as being associated with hearing loss.

Whilst the reasons for this connection are not fully understood, several suggestions have been made, including the brain becoming overloaded due to having to work harder to hear, or hearing loss causing social isolation, with less social engagement resulting in a decline in cognitive function. Some have put it this way, "the strain of decoding sound over the years may overwhelm the brains of people with hearing loss, causing cognitive fatigue, leaving them more vulnerable to dementia." **Whatever the reason, it is now certain that there is a link.**

These studies have put the spotlight on the crucial importance of addressing hearing loss at a much earlier age. Most people tend to leave things until their hearing gets so bad that they are forced to do something about it. However, the evidence suggests that we need to recognise the value of having our hearing checked regularly from the age of 45. Treating hearing

loss early could delay the onset of dementia or reduce its severity in later life.

In a public statement by the British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists (of which Sarah Vokes is a past President) the CEO, David Welbourn, repeated the Society's call for people to look after their hearing, and to get their hearing tested regularly, as an important step to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Reacting to the latest study, he said: *"For far too long, hearing loss has been considered unimportant by too many in the medical community. It has often been passed off as an inevitable consequence of ageing. The Lancet commission on dementia is the latest, and perhaps the most definitive, of a growing body of evidence pointing to an important truth: the risk of dementia can be significantly reduced if people take good care of their hearing."*

We at Correct Hearing are passionate, not only about hearing healthcare, but also the general wellbeing of people in our community. We want to encourage as many as possible to get their hearing checked. A 15-minute screening will identify if a full hearing assessment is necessary, and if it is, we will provide this free of charge. ■

***This is another area where the Correct Hearing Healthcare service goes beyond just the sale and fitting of hearing aids.***

To make an appointment please phone **0115 961 8351** or email **info@correcthearing.co.uk**

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