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A Correlation between Hearing Loss and Dementia

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The correlation between hearing loss and certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, cardiovascular and kidney disease is well documented. There is also compelling evidence that suggests a link between a hearing loss, dementia and Alzheimer's, both of which are degenerative diseases that lead to progressive memory loss in the elderly. It is a fact that multiple research studies have shown that hearing loss not only exacerbates the symptoms of dementia and Alzheimer's, but may also be an important risk factor. New research suggests that adults who experience hearing loss may face a higher risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease than those who don't suffer from hearing loss. The researchers found that mild hearing loss was linked to a slight increase in dementia risk, but this risk increased notably amongst those with moderate and severe hearing loss. I have seen myself the strong correlation between the severity of cognitive decline and the degree of hearing loss.

Many symptoms of hearing loss are similar to those found in Alzheimer's, including the effect on speech and language and incidence of depression. Symptoms of confusion, withdrawal and disorientation may be caused by untreated hearing loss.

Some people have suggested that the most powerful risk factor in developing Alzheimer's is age itself, meaning the older you are the more likely you are to develop the disease. We know that this risk doubles every five years after the age of 65. There is some belief that the neurons that mediate hearing may be a kind of marker for similar damage to nerve cells involved in memory and higher cognition. We are also well aware that hearing loss is very socially isolating. There is a lot of evidence that cognitive engagement protects against dementia. This may mean that the loss of cognitive stimulation could itself contribute to the risk for Alzheimer's.

There is however, a significant drop in communication problems with Alzheimer's and dementia patients whose hearing loss is properly diagnosed and appropriately fit with hearing aids. Treating hearing loss will allow the brain to continue to be stimulated and active, allowing the patient to stay alert. Good hearing is essential to stimulating parts of our brain required for memory. It is also critical to our overall health and well-being. Hearing aids and other assistive listening devices can prove extremely beneficial for the Alzheimer's and dementia patients, as they are for anyone for hearing loss. I am always excited to hear when family members and caregivers express the surprising, often significant, "boost" in cognitive function, ease in communication and overall happiness often achieved with the benefit from amplification.

It is critical that if you know anyone suffering from memory loss, that you encourage them to see an Audiologist and get their hearing tested. Conversely, as long as hearing loss remains undiagnosed, there is a risk that the elderly are treated as if they suffer from Alzheimer's or dementia. Hearing loss is almost always treatable and may indeed be a critical piece of the "memory loss" puzzle!