Victorian Hearing™
Celebrating 20 years

Cognition, Dementia and Hearing Loss

Ageing is the largest risk factor for the incidence of dementia and hearing loss is one of the most common conditions affecting us as we age. The two frequently co-occur, and while there is no good evidence that hearing loss directly causes dementia, extensive research confirms a meaningful association between the two. Treating hearing loss can make a real difference to brain health, social connection, and quality of life.

Key Research Findings

61% Increased risk of developing dementia associated with poor speech-in-noise ability, observed over 11 years in a study of 82,039 people (Stevenson et al., 2025)

160 clinics Hearing aid users demonstrated significantly better cognitive performance (Sarant et. al, 2024, Lin et al, 2023)

Multiple factors Hearing loss is frequently associated with neurological and neurodegenerative disorders including dementia as well as stress, anxiety, depression, social isolation.

Social isolation Social isolation increases dementia risk equally across all racial and ethnic groups assessed making it a universal concern.

How Hearing Loss Affects the Brain

When hearing becomes difficult, everyday conversations feel exhausting. People begin withdrawing, skipping social events, avoiding phone calls, turning down invitations. What starts as a practical coping strategy slowly erodes the social connections that keep the brain active and resilient.

Social isolation is one of the most significant and often overlooked links between hearing loss and dementia.

Hearing relies on complex cognitive processes that engage the hippocampus, limbic system and prefrontal cortex. When hearing is compromised, the cognitive load of listening increases, leaving fewer resources for memory and comprehension.

Age-related hearing loss affects far more than just the ears. Clinically, patients frequently experience:

- Withdrawal from social gatherings and conversions
- Reduced participation in community and family life
- Increased reliance on others to interpret conversations on their behalf
- Growing feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and low confidence
- Depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms linked to communication breakdown
- A diminished sense of independence and self-worth

The cost is not just cognitive; it is emotional and relational. Untreated hearing loss quietly reshapes how people move through their world. The people they love often bear witness to that withdrawal long before a formal diagnosis is made.

Treating hearing loss is therefore not just about hearing more clearly. It is about staying connected to conversations, to relationships, and to life.

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What is the Link Between Hearing Loss and Dementia?

The relationship between hearing loss and cognitive decline is complex and multifactorial. Current evidence points to several contributing pathways for this association:

- Hearing loss can be mistaken for dementia or make the symptoms of dementia appear worse
- Untreated hearing loss in global studies have shown likely links with reduced earnings, increased workplace absenteeism, lower workplace productivity, depression, anxiety and cognitive decline
- The regular use of hearing aids and cochlear implants are associated with a decreased risk of subsequent cognitive decline
- Untreated hearing loss is strongly correlated with cognitive decline and increased dementia risk at a population level, but this risk varies between individuals.

One widely discussed explanation is that the same underlying processes in our brains as people age such as reduced blood flow, inflammation and cellular damage over time, may simultaneously affect both our ability to hear and our ability to think. In other words, hearing loss and cognitive decline may share a common root cause, rather than one causing the other.

What Can Be Done?

The evidence is clear: Treating hearing loss matters for brain health. We can all be proactive about our ear health and wellbeing.

- Annual hearing checks are strongly advised, particularly from midlife onward
- Early diagnosis and treatment may be effective in slowing the onset of cognitive decline
- Hearing aids not only improve hearing they help restore the social connections that protect the brain
- Staying socially engaged is one of the most protective things a person can do for long-term brain health
- Poor speech-in-noise ability is an early warning sign

Don't wait for hearing loss to become severe. If you or someone you care for is experiencing difficulties with hearing or memory, speak with your Audiologist or GP today for further assessment.

The National Dementia Helpline is funded by the Australian Government and interpreter services are available 1800 100 500. People looking for information can also visit dementia.org.au

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