

Hearing aids could help to fight dementia

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Less than a third of people who could benefit from a hearing aid use one, a charity said
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Wearing a hearing aid in later life could slow the ageing of the brain and [defend against dementia](#), research suggests.

A study found that people who wore aids for age-related hearing problems maintained better cognitive functions than those with similar hearing who did not use them. Those who wore them had brains that performed as if they were, on average, eight years younger.

Previous studies had linked hearing loss in middle age and later life to a raised risk of [dementia](#), possibly because deafness can lead to social isolation.

“The message here is that if you’re advised you need a hearing aid, find one that works for you,” Clive Ballard, a dementia expert at the University of Exeter, said. “At the very least it will improve your hearing and it could help keep your brain sharp too.”

Nearly seven million people in Britain could benefit from hearing aids but only about two million use them, according to the charity Hearing Dogs for Deaf People. About 850,000 people in the UK are thought to be living with dementia, about 300,000 of whom have yet to receive a diagnosis.

People with a high genetic risk of dementia can improve their chances of avoiding conditions such as Alzheimer's with a healthy lifestyle including regular exercise, eating sensibly, drinking only moderately and refraining from smoking. Professor Ballard has now suggested that hearing aids could also be a valuable weapon in staving off the illness.

The link between hearing loss and dementia is not fully understood. Professor Ballard said: "One hypothesis is that when the sensory nerve cells involved in hearing become dysfunctional it leads to dysfunction in the other nerves they interact with in the brain and that this may then slowly spread in a cascade effect.

"Another suggestion is that hearing loss contributes to social isolation or depression, which we know are risk factors for dementia. It is exciting that hearing aids may help protect against this risk but further robust research is needed."

People who wear hearing aids are typically more affluent and have healthier lifestyles, both factors that also protect against cognitive decline.

The new research, conducted by the University of Exeter and King's College London, looked at 25,000 people who were aged 50 or above. The subjects were split into two groups, one made up of people who wore hearing aids and the other in which they did not. Both undertook annual cognitive tests over two years. The subjects who wore hearing aids performed better in tasks that assessed working memory and aspects of attention. They also appeared to have faster reaction times.

The results, which have not been peer-reviewed, were presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference in Los Angeles.

Rebecca Dewey of the University of Nottingham, who was not involved in the research, said that the findings agreed with smaller studies. "A lot of research undertaken independently around the world agrees with the message that hearing aids are beneficial cognitively for those who need them, and that too much of the time hearing aids sit in a drawer, to the disadvantage of the person," she said.

Llwyd Orton at Manchester Metropolitan University, also not involved in the study, said that one argument against a direct association between hearing loss and cognitive decline was that no such link was apparent in people with hearing loss early in life.

“A reason hearing aids may work in [patients with age-related hearing loss] is that losing hearing function later in life is socially isolating, while younger people develop sign language and social groups where communication is not dependent on sound.”