

Neglecting hearing issues can cause problems

BY JAIME SILVA

Tribune Guest Writer

Working in audiology for more than 25 years has magnified first-hand the sheer quantity of how many patients struggle with memory and cognitive function, alongside their hearing loss.

Many patients lost the ability to hear well over five years prior to finally coming to our office to get diagnosed. Once they are diagnosed with treatable hearing loss, they will often unfortunately wait another five to seven years before they commit to getting help.

Due to the stigma of wearing hearing aids, many patients will wait so long that their hearing will get worse and worse.

Unfortunately, during this time, patients that don't get help may face several challenges that can impact their quality of life:

Social isolation. Patients with hearing loss will often avoid difficult situations

leading to withdrawal from social interactions leading to isolation and depression.

Cognitive decline. Increased risk of memory problems and dementia due to reduced auditory stimulation and mental engagement.

Mental issues. Struggling to hear can lead to losing confidence in one's ability to communicate – causing frustration, anger, and anxiety as individuals may feel embarrassed or misunderstood.

Research over the past 20 years has solidified the link between hearing loss and dementia. Dementia prevalence has doubled globally from 2000 to 2020.

Just last month, JAMA published a groundbreaking finding that 32% of dementia is attributed to hearing loss.

Hearing loss may contribute to dementia through social isolation, reduced cognitive stimulation and increased cognitive load, as the brain must work harder to process sounds.

As hearing loss and dementia cases

rise, whole families face increased challenges as well:

- Hearing loss and dementia both impair communication, straining family relationships and increasing caregiver's burdens.
- Families may notice loved ones with hearing loss and memory problems withdrawing from activities and causing loneliness from both sides.
- The rise in cases means more families are managing complex care including hearing aid use and dementia-related behavioral changes.

The link between the two conditions underscores the importance of early detection and treatment.

My recommendation to patients is to have a hearing test every three to five years if you are over the age of 50, even without suspecting hearing loss. Obvious symptoms include:

- Struggling to follow conversations especially in noisy environments or ask-

ing people to repeat themselves.

- Difficulty hearing high-pitched sounds, like doorbells, birds, car turn signals.
- Tinnitus, or persistent ringing, buzzing or other noises in your ears.
- Avoiding social situations, feeling isolated or noticing others pointing out your difficulty hearing.

If you have been diagnosed with treatable hearing loss, it's best to seek a hearing aid evaluation with your hearing care provider to discuss options that best suit your hearing loss, lifestyle and needs.

Wearing hearing aids early on may help reduce the risk or progression of dementia by addressing hearing loss, a key link to cognitive decline.

Jaime Silva is a hearing care practitioner at Desert Hearing Care in Mesa. If someone has a concern about hearing, tinnitus or cognitive health, they should start by scheduling a complimentary hearing test. Information: deserthearing-care.com. ■

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