

Hearing loss is more than just an irritation – it can increase your risk of dementia. But there are things you can do about it

BY ROXANNE MOONEYS

A WORD IN YOUR EAR

HAVE you ever struggled to hear people talking in a busy restaurant? Or do you sometimes feel exhausted after a conversation because you had to concentrate really hard to understand what the other person was saying?

If so, it might be time to get your hearing tested because hearing loss isn't just about your ears – it's also about your brain.

Research has shown a clear connection

between hearing loss and dementia, says Dr Louis Hofmeyr, a Cape Town ear, nose and throat specialist and chairman of the South African Cochlear Implant Group.

The two conditions have long been associated with each other, and studies have confirmed there is a link. "Research shows that hearing loss increases the chance of cognitive decline, especially if it's not treated," Hofmeyr says.

Hearing loss, which is a decline in the ability to perceive sounds, can lead to social isolation and cognitive decline. This isolation can subsequently play a role in

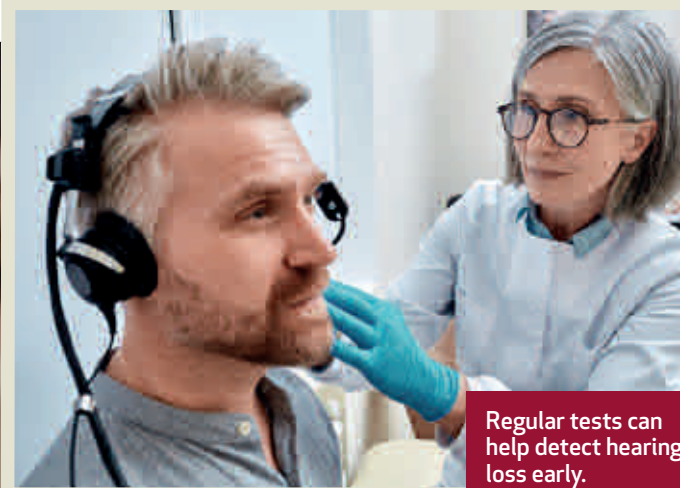
the deterioration of cognitive functions associated with dementia, including memory, language skills and reasoning.

When you don't hear well, it becomes increasingly difficult to participate in conversations. You withdraw. You start going out less, asking fewer questions, and laughing less with others. And it is precisely this social isolation that is a major risk factor for dementia.

"When people communicate less, their brain receives less stimulation," Hofmeyr says. "It affects memory, language, reasoning – all the things associated with dementia."

A study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society found that elderly people with severe hearing loss have a 50% higher risk of experiencing cognitive decline compared to those who can hear well.

That's why it's important to have your hearing tested by the age of 50 so action can be taken if you need it, Hofmeyr says. "This can reduce the possibility of a decline in brain activity and improve quality of life."



Regular tests can help detect hearing loss early.



There are many discreet hearing aids available.

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOUR HEARING IS STARTING TO DETERIORATE?

Look out for these warning signs:

- You struggle to hear people talking, especially when there's other noise.
- You frequently ask people to repeat themselves when you're having a conversation.
- You feel exhausted after social gatherings.
- You avoid company or withdraw from other people.
- You experience memory problems, struggle with problem-solving, have difficulty completing ordinary tasks, confuse times and places, and suddenly develop problems with words that were previously familiar.

If you have one or more of these signs, it's time to take action.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The good news is that hearing loss is usually easily detected and treatable.

"Adults should have their hearing tested regularly from the age of 50 – in the same way that you monitor your blood pressure and cholesterol," Hofmeyr says.

It's especially important to get regular checks if you already have risk factors for dementia, such as:

- a family history of dementia
- diabetes, high cholesterol or arteriosclerosis
- a history of ear disease or frequent exposure to loud noise
- you're a smoker
- your alcohol intake is excessive



A cross-section of a brain affected by dementia. Hearing loss can lead to a decline in cognitive function in the elderly.

WHAT COMES FIRST – HEARING LOSS OR DEMENTIA?

Hearing loss can be the cause or the result of dementia.

"The interaction between hearing loss and the brain is complex," Hofmeyr says. Sometimes, people with dementia lose their ability to understand sounds and words properly – not because they are deaf but because their brains struggle to process the sounds.

This happens especially with Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia, both of which cause changes in brain areas responsible for auditory perception. These changes can lead to a decrease in the ability to separate relevant sounds from

irrelevant background noise.

But in most cases, hearing loss comes first – and often long before any signs of dementia. If you don't hear well, it becomes harder to have conversations with people. The result of this is that you start to withdraw, and this means your brain gets less "exercise", which is what

can accelerate cognitive decline.

"Research indicates that the brain, in response to hearing loss, undergoes a process of rearrangement," Hofmeyr says. "This plasticity can lead to areas of the brain that were originally responsible for and connected to hearing being reorganised to support other senses or functions."

WHAT IF YOUR TEST SHOWS HEARING LOSS?

There are solutions, Hofmeyr says – and the faster you act, the better.

Hearing aids amplify sound, helping you communicate normally again. In cases of severe hearing loss, a cochlear implant, which directly stimulates the auditory nerve, can make a difference.

"Studies show hearing aids can help to delay cognitive decline," Hofmeyr says. "So they are not just an aid for your ears, but also for your brain."

There are different types of hearing loss – conductive hearing loss, sensorineural (cochlear and nerve) hearing loss and mixed hearing loss – and any of them can lead to dementia.

"The mechanism of the hearing loss is irrelevant. But since sensorineural hearing loss is more related to ageing and more common in older people, it is the most common cause," Hofmeyr says.

LISTEN TO WHAT YOUR EARS ARE TELLING YOU

Hearing loss is often gradual – so slow that you barely notice it. But if you ignore it, it can affect your social life, your mental health and ultimately your brain function.

"Paying attention to hearing loss is one of the most important things you can do for your brain health," Hofmeyr says. □

APPS TO TEST YOUR HEARING

You can try these apps to test your hearing yourself, Hofmeyr says. However, although they can be useful, it's better to visit a professional for an accurate assessment of your hearing.



MIMI



HEARWHO



SENNHEISER HEARING TEST



HEARING TEST BY AUDICUS