

Can Skipping Holiday Gatherings Contribute to Dementia?

By Kristin Johnston, BA, BC-HIS, Owner and Carli Van Harken, HIS, Owner

The holiday season is filled with opportunities for festivities with friends and family, but not everyone is going to be excited about that. **For people who suffer from hearing loss, social gatherings are challenging to say the least.** It's frustrating to always miss half of a conversation or to ask people to repeat themselves – again and again. Some people might just want to stay home.

Those who do stay home, however, are missing out on more than just eggnog and Christmas cookies. A growing body of research indicates they **may be increasing their risk for dementia.**

The Alzheimer's Association cites several studies indicating that having a strong support network and staying mentally active in later years could lower your risk of dementia.

The ability to hear well is connected to both of those factors. When your auditory system is working, your brain is actively deciphering everything it hears. And if hearing loss makes you avoid social situations, your support system isn't being nourished.

A Johns Hopkins University study done in 2011 showed that subjects with mild hearing loss were twice as likely to develop dementia than those without hearing loss.

And the likelihood of dementia increased with the amount of hearing loss: People were three times as likely to develop it if they had moderate hearing loss and five times as likely with severe hearing loss.

An additional study showed a link between hearing loss and the loss of brain tissue. Although the brain naturally becomes smaller with age, the shrinkage appears to accelerate in older adults with hearing loss.

A Brandeis University researcher said that "effortful listening" due to hearing loss has been associated with higher stress levels and poorer performance on memory tests. The part of the brain that used to focus on storing what is heard is instead likely being used simply to understand what is heard.

As stated earlier, studies cited by the Alzheimer's Association show that maintaining strong social connections and keeping mentally active as we age might lower the risk of cognitive decline. For someone who suffers from hearing loss, a way to address both those issues is through hearing aids.

Research from the Better Hearing Institute shows that **people who are hard of hearing but use hearing aids are more likely to have a strong support network**, going out and meeting with friends and family. Some research subjects said using hearing aids even had a positive effect on their relationships.

As with most medical conditions, early intervention is the key. If you have a patient or family member exhibit signs of hearing loss, urge them to reach out to Comprehensive Ear & Hearing for a free assessment. It might make their holidays all that much happier.

SOURCES:

- <http://www.betterhearing.org/news/link-memory-cognitive-function-elevates-urgency-treating-hearing-loss>
- <https://www.beltone.com/hearing-health/alzheimers-and-hearing-loss.aspx>
- <http://www.aarp.org/health/brain-health/info-07-2013/hearing-loss-linked-to-dementia.html>

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Terry DeGroot, M.D.

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and Joy that the Season can bring!*

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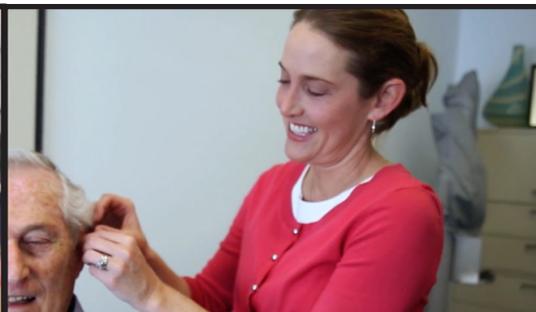
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