

New study released shows affect of hearing aids on cognitive decline in older adults

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Editor

In July, the Alzheimer's Association released a study on the affects that hearing aids can have on slowing cognitive decline in older adults with hearing loss who are at risk for cognitive decline. The study was the largest clinical trial ever done to investigate whether hearing loss treatment intervention could reduce the risk of cognitive decline, and was conducted in a subgroup of older adults with hearing loss who were at a higher risk of cognitive decline. The results of the study showed that using hearing aids for three years cut cognitive decline in half.

Locally, Doctor of Audiology Rebecca Younk, who works through Associated Hearing Care with Beltone Technology in the CCM Health Clinic, was excited to hear the results of the study that validated what she, herself, has observed in her practice.

Younk, who has been in practice locally since 2017, says that for around 20 years, audiologists have known that there was an increased risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's for those who have hearing loss. "We knew that. There was lots of research showing an increased risk in developing cognitive decline when you have untreated hearing loss," Younk says. "What we didn't know was whether intervention with hearing aids and cochlear implants would slow that progression, and so that's what the most recent research was looking at."

The study, Aging and Cognitive Health Evaluation in Elders (ACHIEVE), was released at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference this year in Amsterdam. The study says the three-year intervention included a comprehensive neurocognitive testing battery, which included procedures to help ensure that hearing loss would not affect the results.

"The hearing intervention had a significant effect on reducing cognitive change within three years in the population of older adults in the study who are at increased risk for cognitive decline," said Frank Lin, M.D., Ph.D., of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and Bloomberg School of Public Health, and co-primary investigator of the ACHIEVE study. "Hearing loss is very treatable in later life, which makes it an important public health target to reduce risk of cognitive decline and dementia, along with other dementia risk factors such as less education in early life, high blood pressure, social isolation and physical inactivity."

With the study showing a 48% reduction in cognitive decline over three years, Younk says, "It was fantastic. It said to us our intervention does work. We don't

want anyone to have cognitive decline, so if we can find little interventions that will address that and slow down the flow, slow down the decline, that's a win in our book."

Younk also notes that it's especially important in Greater Minnesota. "Our population is aging and we know that every twenty years, basically, we're going to have an increase of double of people with dementia and Alzheimer's. So that puts a lot more people at risk, and if we can slow down that cognitive decline through intervention, we're happy about that," she says.

Younk has had many patients over the years that have been brought in by family members concerned about their decline in interacting with conversations, choosing to test hearing before testing for cognitive impairment, hoping the solution could be found in hearing loss. "There have been dozens of times where we've introduced hearing technology and all of a sudden they're mom or dad again and they're back in the conversation," Younk says.

But also, hearing intervention can occur in younger generations - farmers suffering from some hearing damage or hearing loss from loud equipment, firearm hunting, power tools and more. Younk also notes they see youth, especially high school age, who have suffered noise induced hearing loss from various hobbies and occupations. "We talk about hearing protection and protecting your hearing, especially for hunters because it takes one shot from a firearm to cause hearing loss or tinnitus. We encourage people to consider hearing protection," she says.

Younk also encourages baseline hearing tests annually. "The wonderful thing is that most insurance companies pay for a baseline hearing test and annual hearing tests to monitor any issues," she says. "So if you're concerned get a baseline, talk to an audiologist about what you can do to protect your hearing and making sure that hearing loss doesn't develop so that's one less thing you have to worry about in the future that could contribute to cognitive decline."

In the state of Minnesota, there is a newly passed insurance mandate from the last Legislative session that says those with hearing loss must now be covered by insurance companies for hearing aids. "There are some caveats to that," Younk says. "Medicare individuals, those on Medicare it doesn't cover, but anyone younger than that, insurance companies are required to cover hearing aids now. Before this year, it was children they were required to cover, and now this year, insurance companies were expanded into adults. And we are seeing now more and more people who are working adults that maybe wouldn't have come in to see us before because hearing aids weren't covered."

Younk's office is able to provide insurance verification and help patients through the process if needed.