

Hearing loss and mental decline in the elderly

A new study links hearing loss with increased mental decline in older people

Medical professionals understand that hearing loss can lead to social isolation and depression, particularly amongst older people. Now, a new study has revealed a direct association between hearing loss and reduced memory or thinking abilities in the elderly.

The study was published online on Jan. 21 in [JAMA Internal Medicine](#).

Study participants, aged 70 to 79, had good mental abilities when they initially underwent hearing and psychological testing. They were followed up for six years.

At the end of the study, the people with hearing loss were more likely to have lower scores for mental abilities.

People with hearing problems were 24% more likely to develop mental decline.

On average, the researchers believed that people with hearing loss would take 7.7 years to develop mental decline, whereas people with normal hearing would take 10.9 years.

While the study showed an *association* between hearing loss and mental decline it didn't prove that hearing loss *caused* the mental decline (or vice versa).

The researchers did suggest that hearing loss reduced people's ability to interact socially, which could lead to loss of mental abilities.

Alternatively, it could be that when more brain power is being used to help with hearing, less brain power is available for other processes such as memory and thinking. This could lead to earlier signs of mental decline.²

It may be the case that hearing loss in the elderly and mental decline are caused by a common process, but more research is needed to understand the relationship.

Better understanding of the link between hearing and mental ability could prove important for our understanding of the causes dementia and for the treatment of people with this increasingly common condition.