

Local Doctor Treating Hearing Loss Espouses Link with Memory Loss

By Paul Lonardo

“We listen with our ears and we hear with our brains,” is something that Dr. Mary Kay Uchmanowicz likes to say, and with good reason. Dr. Mary Kay is an audiologist with nearly forty years of experiences and is the owner of Twin River Hearing Health, Inc. a private audiology and hearing aid dispensing practice located at 151 Douglas Pike in Smithfield, where she has been since 2001 after relocating her business from Providence.

There is an obvious connection between our ears and our brain, as what we hear passes through our ears and goes to the brain where the sounds are processed into words that have meaning to us. What many people may not be aware that the same part of the brain involved in our hearing is also responsible for memory, and that there may be a link between hearing loss and memory loss.

“Research suggests that when people experience age-related hearing loss, that area of their brain shrinks,” Dr. Mary Kay says, “and as a result, other areas of their brain used for higher-level de-



Dr. Mary Kay Uchmanowicz

isions are then activated for hearing sounds. The speculation is that the strain of decoding sounds over the years may overwhelm the brain of people with age-related hearing loss leaving them vulnerable to dementia.”

In her practice, Dr. Mary Kay sees that the early signs of dementia and Alzheimer’s and the early signs of mild hearing loss are almost identical. “A person with hearing loss does not hear a family member’s response in a conversation, or they answer a question incorrectly,” she says. “In dementia, a family member will have to repeat themselves in a conversation because the person is not following what they’re saying.”

Dr. Mary Kay denotes the increase of social isolation and depression that is seen in both hearing loss and early dementia. “In hearing loss, a person’s auditory processes slow down to the point that they can’t keep up with conversation and interact. In more severe hearing loss, people stop going to the movies and engaging in other social activities, which is what you see in dementia also.”

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In her practice, people who come in to see her for hearing loss but what they are experiencing are early signs of dementia. She similarly sees just the opposite, where she sees someone who is believed to be suffering from dementia but what they really have a problem with is hearing loss.

The statistics are really alarming, Dr. Mary Kay points out. "We know that in 2018, an estimated 5.7 million Americans were suffering with Alzheimer's. They say that every 65 seconds someone develops it."

She cautions that this does not suggest that hearing loss causes dementia, only that there is a link. "The risk of dementia increases with untreated hearing loss," Dr. Mary Kay says. "With mild hearing loss, you have two times the likelihood of developing dementia. With a moderate loss, you are three times as likely to develop dementia. And with severe loss of hearing, the probability of developing dementia jumps to five times compared to someone with no hearing loss."

The trend of increased Dementia and Alzheimer's cases is expected to continue, with prognosticators estimating that by 2050, one in thirty people will have dementia.

While there is no cure to this insidious disease, there are things that can be done to slow the progression and diminish its effects. Dr. Mary Kay recommends that everyone over the age of 60 should have their hearing checked. And if any hearing loss is detected, hearing aids should be used.

"Studies have shown in treating hearing loss, hearing aids slow down the effects of patients with dementia," she says. "It works because, reduced hearing stimulation, particularly high frequencies, is associated with changed brain structures and reduce gray matter, and then when you activate the hearing with the new brain technology in today's hearing aids, the benefit of the increased hearing stimulation helps to maintain the plasticity of the brain."

Getting your hearing checked as part of overall health is the right thing to do, even without the risk of dementia. In general, hearing loss is the third most chronic health condition that affects older adults, and one in three people older the age of 60 suffer from age-related hearing loss, about 36 million in the country, which means about 90,000 in Rhode Island. And only a third of all these people are using hearing aids, Dr. Mary Kay points out.

In addition to the traditional expertise of an audiologist, Dr. Mary Kay specializes in tinnitus management and industrial audiology. She is also certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and is a fellow of the American Academy of Audiology.

The Twin Rivers Hearing Health office uses the most advanced clinical equipment available in order to analyze all types of hearing problems, with extensive expertise in state-of-the-art hearing aid technology like programmable and digital processing instruments.

For more information visit <https://www.twinrivershearing.com/> about or call Twin River Hearing Health at 401-349-0456

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