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Untreated Hearing Loss Linked to Depression, Anxiety, Social Isolation in Seniors (May 26, 1999)

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Study finds that denial, cost, and vanity are biggest barriers to use of hearing aids. Seniors who use hearing aids cite better family relationships and improved mental health.

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Untreated hearing loss has serious emotional and social consequences for older persons, according to a [study](#) released today by The National Council on the Aging (NCOA).

"This study debunks the myth that hearing loss in older persons is a harmless condition," said James Firman, Ed.D., president and CEO of The National Council on the Aging. The survey of 2,300 hearing impaired adults age 50 and older found that those with untreated hearing loss were more likely to report depression, anxiety, and paranoia and were less likely to participate in organized social activities, compared to those who wear hearing aids. The study was conducted by Seniors Research Group, an alliance between NCOA and Market Strategies Inc.

The survey found that significantly more of the seniors with untreated hearing loss (those who do not wear hearing aids) reported feelings of sadness or depression that lasted two or more weeks during the previous year. Among respondents with more severe hearing loss, 22 percent of hearing-aid users reported these sad feelings, compared to 30 percent of non-users. Non-users were also more likely to agree with the statement that "people get angry with me usually for no reason" (14 percent of users vs. 23 percent of non-users). Among those with more severe hearing loss, the difference was even greater—14 percent for users vs. 36 percent for non-users.

Also, people who don't use hearing aids were considerably less likely to participate in social activities (20 percent less among those with milder loss, and 24 percent less likely among those with more severe loss).

Firman said the survey was "groundbreaking" not only in the large size of the sample but also in the inclusion 2,090 close family members or friends of the hearing-impaired respondents who were asked a parallel set of questions.

Benefits of Treatment

Hearing aid users reported benefits in many areas of their lives, ranging from their relationships at home and sense of independence to their social life and their sex life. The families of hearing-aid users noticed the improvements, but were even more likely than the users to report the improvements in every dimension the survey measured.

% Hearing Aid Users Reporting	% of their Their Family
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Improvement	Users Reporting Improvement	Reporting Improvements
Relations at home	56%	66%
Feelings about self	50	60
Life overall	48	62
Mental health	36	39
Self-confidence	39	46
Relations with children, grandchildren	40	52
Sense of safety	34	37
Social life	34	41
Relations at work	26	43
Sex life	8	NA

Barriers to Hearing Aid Use

Why would someone with hearing impairment not use hearing aids? Two-thirds of the older, non- user respondents said "my hearing is not bad enough" or "I can along without one." About one-half of the non-users cited the cost of hearing aids. And one-in-five offered the explanation that "it would make me feel old," or "I don't like what others will think about me."

"It is very sad that so many older people are letting denial or vanity get in the way of treatments that can significantly improve the quality of their lives," said Dr. Firman, who is hearing impaired himself. "Doctors and family members should insist that hearing-impaired seniors seek appropriate treatment."

Hearing loss is one of the most prevalent chronic conditions in the United States. More than nine million Americans over the age of 65 have a hearing loss. About three out of five older Americans with hearing loss don't use hearing aids. More than 10 million middle-aged Americans (between the ages of 45 and 64) have a hearing loss.

This survey is ground-breaking in its sample size, its comparison of hearing aid users with non-users, its inclusion of middle-aged and older adults, and its inclusion of family members who were asked a set of questions that paralleled those asked the hearing-impaired respondents. The study was supported by an unrestricted grant from the Hearing Industries Association. NCOA plans to make the survey data set available in a few months to other researchers throughout the world. A file summarizing the study in greater detail appears at the bottom of this page.

The National Council on the Aging is a private, nonprofit research, education, and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting the well-being, dignity, and self-determination of older people. Founded in 1950, NCOA has helped to create the Meals on Wheels, Foster Grandparents, and many other innovative programs for seniors. Members include professionals and service providers in the field of aging, government agencies, consumer groups, faith congregations, businesses, and labor groups. For more information, visit NCOA's Web site at www.ncoa.org

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