

Promoting holistic health in older adults with hearing loss: what's the connection between hearing and general health?

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Why focus on holistic health for those with hearing loss?

Hearing loss, particularly in older adults, is more than a sensory impairment; it is linked to several noncommunicable diseases, including cardiovascular conditions (Tan et al., 2018), diabetes, and cognitive decline/dementia (Maharani et al., 2019). These risks are compounded by challenges, such as reduced physical activity (WHO, 2021), social isolation (Shukla et al., 2020), and lower engagement with health-promoting behaviours (Goodwin et al., 2024). Older adults with hearing loss may not fully understand the connection between hearing and general health, which could hinder their engagement in health-promoting behaviours (Goodwin et al., 2024). Similarly, hearing healthcare appointments—which could provide valuable opportunities to discuss general health—rarely address these issues due to barriers like time constraints, limited training for hearing healthcare professionals (HHCPs), and concerns about professional boundaries.

Therefore, exploring the perspectives of both adults with hearing loss and HHCPs is essential in understanding how to effectively promote positive health behaviours in this population. This research aims to fill these gaps by exploring barriers, empowering professionals, and ensuring health interventions are inclusive and impactful.

By addressing these challenges through this research, we can:

1. Improve health outcomes for an aging population.
2. Reduce the risks associated with hearing loss, such as physical inactivity and social isolation.
3. Help HHCPs engage in conversations around general healthcare with their patients and clients, ultimately Making Every Contact Count (see [NHS Making Every Contact Count](#)).

What did our research involve?

Our research took a multi-phase approach to understand this gap. We conducted:

- **Semi-structured interviews** with 16 participants (8 older adults with hearing loss and 8 HHCPs) to explore their perspectives and experiences of the link between hearing loss and general health.

- **Delphi consensus study** (Linstone & Turoff, 1975; McPherson et al., 2018) with 25 HHCPs to identify strategies for integrating holistic health discussions into hearing appointments.

Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we identified key themes such as the need for culturally sensitive communication, overcoming low health literacy, and tailoring approaches to meet the unique needs of older adults.

What did we learn?

Perspectives of older adults with hearing loss

- *Limited awareness.* Most participants were unaware of the broader health risks associated with hearing loss beyond its link to dementia. When informed, many expressed interest in learning more about these connections.
- *Barriers to engagement.* Older adults cited difficulty accessing reliable information and expressed a preference for receiving general health guidance from trusted professionals and NHS websites.
- *Impact of hearing loss.* Participants noted that hearing loss contributed to reduced physical activity, social isolation, and difficulty maintaining hobbies, all of which impacted their overall health.

Perspectives of HHCPs

- *Awareness of health links.* HHCPs were aware of the associations between hearing loss and other health conditions but felt underprepared to address these in clinical settings.
- *Hesitancy in discussions.* Concerns about breaching professional boundaries, offending patients, and lacking adequate training were common barriers to initiating health conversations.
- *Desire for guidance.* HHCPs expressed a need for structured guidelines and resources to facilitate culturally sensitive, patient-centred health discussions.

Delphi consensus outcomes

Through the Delphi process, HHCPs reached consensus on strategies to promote health behaviours:

- *Health promotion during appointments.* Simple, respectful conversations about physical activity, nutrition, and mental health were identified as impactful ways to integrate health promotion.
- *Interdisciplinary referrals.* HHCPs highlighted the importance of collaborating with other professionals, such as dietitians or physiotherapists, to address complex health needs.
- *Tailored resources.* Visual aids, brochures, and digital tools were recommended, alongside training to build HHCP confidence in holistic health discussions.

Practical implications for health professionals

Our findings suggest several actionable steps for HHCPs and researchers:

- Incorporate holistic health discussions into routine hearing appointments to enhance patient engagement and health literacy.
- Use flexible, tailored approaches—such as a mix of digital and traditional tools—to accommodate individual preferences.
- Collaborate across disciplines to provide comprehensive care that supports the overall well-being of older adults with hearing loss.

What's next?

Overall, our research aims to develop practical guidelines for HHCPs to confidently promote health behaviours in clinical settings. These findings could also inform training programs, helping HHCPs to overcome barriers and engage patients in meaningful health conversations.

Final thoughts.

A key takeaway from this work is the importance of inclusive research methodologies that engage older populations and include active clinicians. Older adults with hearing loss often face additional barriers to participation, from logistical challenges to sensory impairments. By addressing these hurdles, researchers can design interventions that truly reflect the needs and experiences of this population, ensuring greater equity in healthcare outcomes. Lastly, by engaging with active HHCPs in developing guidelines, we are ensuring that they are *practical and realistic, and informed by those closest to the issue*.

Hearing loss does not exist in isolation—it intersects with broader health challenges that require holistic, inclusive approaches (Maidment et al., 2023). By leveraging the unique opportunities within hearing healthcare, we can empower older adults with hearing loss to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives.

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