

Understanding **hearing** and  
**sight problems** and their  
link to **dementia**



## How are **hearing** and **sight** problems linked to **dementia**?

Researchers have found a link between hearing and sight impairments and increased risk of dementia.

People with dementia are more likely to have hearing and/or sight impairment than people of a similar age without dementia.

Some people with dementia can have problems with perceiving sights and sounds, which are caused by the brain rather than their eyes or ears.

Some of the **signs** of **hearing and sight problems** are **similar** to the **early stages** of **dementia**, for example:



- struggling to keep up with conversations



- repeating questions



- disorientation



- lack of motivation or engagement

## Why are **hearing** and **sight** important?

Having a hearing and/or sight problem and dementia makes doing tasks even harder. People living with both hearing and/or sight problems and dementia have a greater risk of risk of:

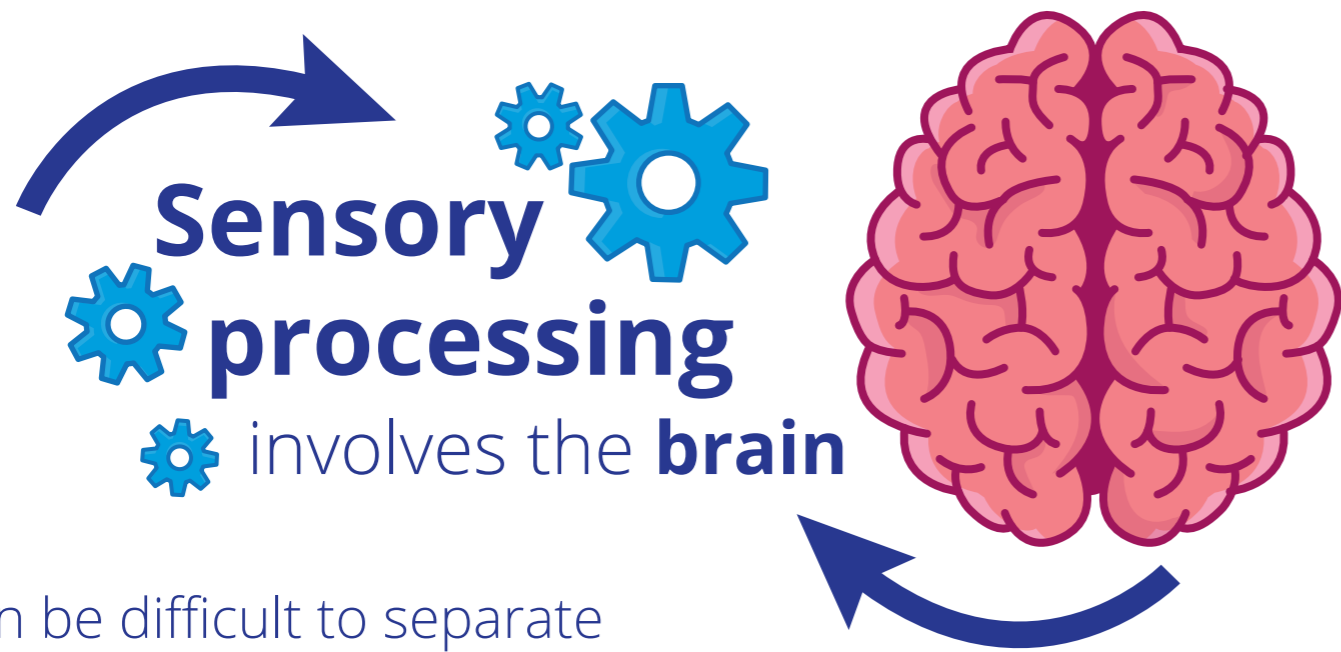
- falls
- communication difficulties
- becoming disorientated
- losing their independence
- social isolation

For these reasons, hearing and sight problems are associated with increased symptoms of dementia, such as agitation, aggression, depression and hallucinations.

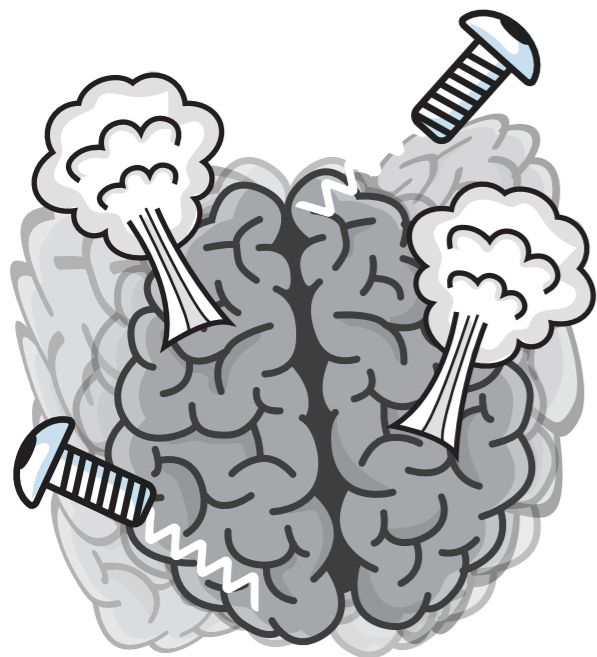
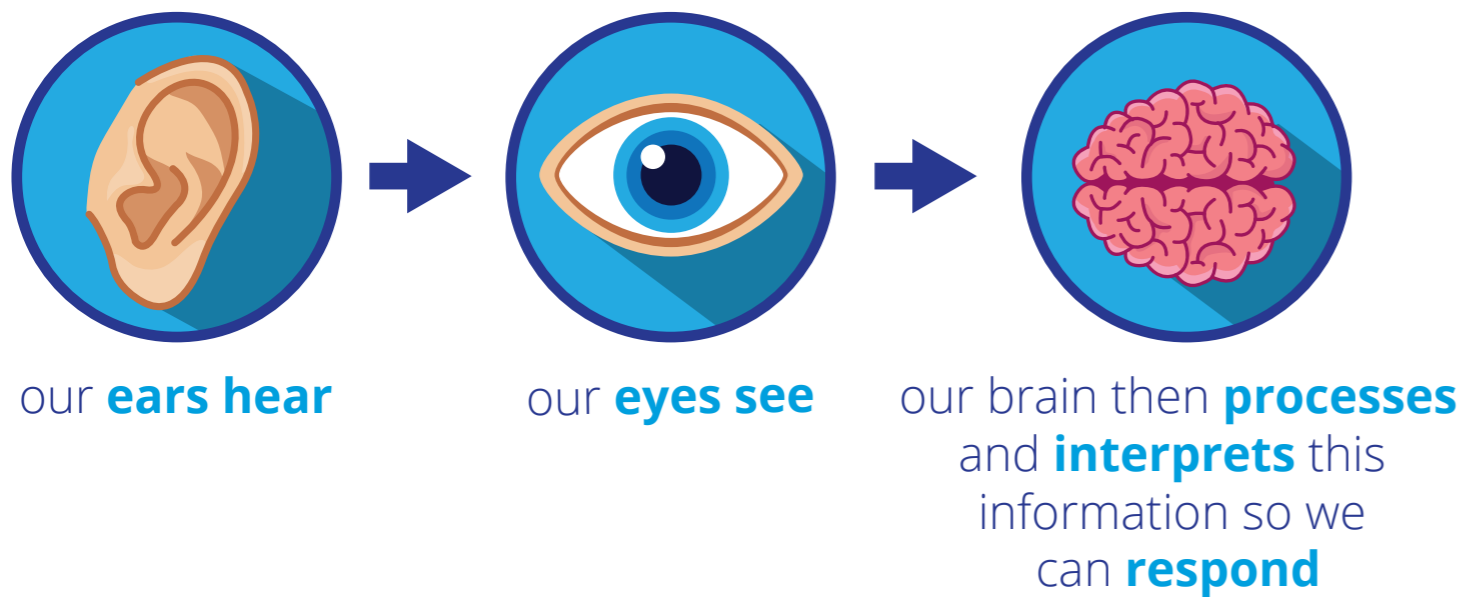
These symptoms of dementia are often some of the hardest parts of caring for people with dementia.

Supporting hearing and vision needs (e.g. using hearing aids, communication techniques, glasses or cataract surgery) are especially important for people with dementia, as support can help to improve outcomes and promote mental well-being, social engagement and quality of life.

Research is ongoing to discover whether **early identification** and management of hearing and sight problems may actually **slow down the progression of dementia**.



it can be difficult to separate out **hearing and/or sight problems** from **dementia symptoms**



For someone with sensory loss, the brain has to **work even harder** to make sense of the things they hear and/or see as the incoming signals are not as clear.

With sensory loss **PLUS** dementia, there is a **double hit**, the brain is working harder but it is already under stress.

## How do I **support** someone with **hearing** and/or **sight** problems and **dementia**?

Hearing and sight problems develop gradually, so people may not realise they have a hearing or sight problem. It is important that people with dementia have **regular hearing and sight checks**.

“Mum was complaining of seeing spiders webs whenever she was reading, and telling us spiders were walking across the pages of the book. This was an early sign of possible retinal detachment as picked up by the optician, who advised we take Mum to the Eye hospital the same day”

- Make sure you **inform** the professionals about the dementia diagnosis at each appointment, as this information can be missed off any referrals.

**Adapting the environment** is an important way to help people with hearing and/or sight problems maintain independence and wellbeing. Simple changes include:

- Keeping background noise low and using soft furnishings to help absorb sound
- Make sure the lighting is good and bright, and adjust areas of glare or shadow
- Remove any obvious obstacles for getting around and ensure the furniture is set up to facilitate face to face communication
- Use contrasting colours for everyday activities as well as floors, walls and furniture so it is easy to detect and find things
- Consider flashing lights/vibrating alarms for smoke or carbon monoxide detectors

It is important to **make the most of the remaining hearing and/or sight**. Local hearing and sight specialists will be able to work with you and advise on strategies and equipment which may help.

“*My wife was diagnosed with dementia about 10 years after her hearing loss. As her dementia progressed she had a tendency to remove her hearing aids if they were irritating her. She would lose them at times. She would often not notice if the battery needed changing and found it difficult to switch to loop mode when necessary. When we told audiology she had dementia they were very helpful with strategies to help support us*”

People with dementia may need **extra support and encouragement** to use equipment. For example, they may need reminders to wear their hearing aids or glasses, and make sure the hearing aids or glasses are clean and functioning.

“*For us as a family, we found it really helpful to schedule reminders in mums diary to help her to manage her hearing loss. We now regularly help to clean her hearing aids and change the wax filters, as well as administer preventative oil drops every fortnight for managing wax build up. It has saved Mum having to go through ear syringing which she hates*”

**Specialist equipment** may help. For people with hearing loss who cannot or will not use hearing aids, other devices such as personal listeners are available. Personal listeners are a microphone, amplifier and simple headset. Personal listeners can help communication or when watching the TV.

Low vision aids such as special lights, magnifiers or talking equipment are also available for people with sight problems.

## Top tips for successful communication



### For someone with hearing loss and dementia:

- Always **get the person's attention** and **look at them** when you are talking so they can see your lips, facial expressions and gestures
- Check the environment – **turn off noisy distractions** such as the TV or radio
- **Speak clearly** but not too slowly and do not shout. Shouting makes it harder for someone to read your lips.
- **Use simple language.** If the person does not understand what you have said, think of other ways to say it



### For someone with sight loss and dementia:

- Always **get the person's attention** first by saying their name, and when appropriate by touch, to **help let them know you are there**. Then explain who you are
- Say what you are going to do **before** you are doing it and **as you are doing it**
- Remember they **may not be able to see** facial expressions and gestures

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