

The many effects of hearing loss

By Jennifer Morris

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To some, hearing loss can be seen as a nuisance, an unfriendly byproduct of growing old or spending years working amidst loud noises. In reality, untreated hearing loss can have long-reaching ramifications, troubling not just a person's ability to hear, but to remember.

"When a hearing loss is untreated, it takes much, much, much more brain power to compensate for the hearing loss that's there," explains Dr. Megan Nightingale AuD of Peninsula Hearing, Inc.

When a person has trouble deciphering words and sounds, they often take to observing a speaker's facial movements or discovering meanings only by examining the context of the conversation. "All those processes are what we call 'top down' or 'brain processes.' It's using brain power to try to fill in the missing information."

Research conducted within the last decade worldwide, from Australia to China to Seattle, has shown the effects hearing loss can have on the brain, especially in relation to short term working memory. Those with hearing loss are more likely to struggle in retaining information.

And people diagnosed with cognitive deficiencies, such as Alzheimer's or dementia, could face worsened prognoses with an untreated hearing loss, Dr. Nightingale explained.

"You already have a struggling system" she noted. "If there is also a hearing deficiency, it compounds the problem."

First opened in 1990, Peninsula Hearing, Inc. has grown to two offices, one in Poulsbo, and a satellite office in Port Townsend.

Dr. Nightingale studied audiology at Oregon State University, and has since received a

Doctor of Audiology (AuD) degree from the School of Audiology at Pennsylvania College of Optometry, where she specialized in rehabilitation of hearing impairment in adults.

She now provides hearing evaluations for adults and school-aged children, comprehensive hearing aid fittings and adjustments, hearing aid repair and programming, industrial hearing conservation services and educational audiology for hearing impaired youth.

Dr. Nightingale said hearing losses sometimes goes undiagnosed and untreated for years.

Tinnitus, a ringing in the ears, is often a first sign. Ninety percent of Tinnitus cases are caused because of an underlying hearing loss.

"Most people won't notice a hearing problem until someone else close to them notices it for them," Nightingale said. "How do you know if you don't hear something?"

The first step, after noticing a potential hearing problem, is to have your hearing tested: It's the only way, Dr. Nightingale explained, to know definitively.