

Ask the *expert*

Sigrid Scherpiet on Holistic Hearing Care

Healthy aging requires healthy hearing. While most people immediately think of problems with speech understanding and participating in communication, hearing health has a far greater impact on a person's overall well-being. Hearing loss having been identified as a risk factor for social isolation, depression, cardiovascular diseases and cognitive decline, more and more experts advocate for a more holistic approach to hearing care going forward. We have talked to Sigrid Scherpiet, expert in Audiological Health Services at Sonova. In this interview, she gives us a deeper insight into the latest findings on good hearing and healthy aging, and what these findings imply for clinical practice.

What are the latest findings on good hearing in older age?

Recently, two studies were published that have provided new evidence on the link between hearing health and cognitive health. The long-awaited results of the randomized controlled trial, **ACHIEVE**¹ by Johns Hopkins University were published in summer 2023. The study aimed to investigate whether hearing intervention could slow down cognitive decline in older adults with hearing loss and led to the following key finding:

ACHIEVE study¹

Wearing hearing aids can **slow down the loss of thinking and memory abilities by**

48%

over 3 years in older adults at increased risk for cognitive decline.

These encouraging findings were backed by the **ENHANCE** study by Prof. Julia Sarant from the University of Melbourne.² With a slightly different set-up, it also focused on assessing the potentially positive impact of hearing intervention on cognition and came to a similar result: individuals in the hearing aid intervention group maintained their cognitive abilities over three years, whereas the participants without hearing intervention showed a decline in cognition over the same time.

Holistic Hearing Care

This approach to hearing care considers the overall well-being of an individual in addition to addressing specific hearing-related issues. Recognizing that hearing health is interconnected with various aspects of an individual's life, including physical, cognitive, and social-emotional well-being, the goal is to provide comprehensive and personalized solutions that do not only improve hearing but also enhance the overall quality of life. This may involve a combination of hearing devices, communication strategies, counseling, and lifestyle recommendations.

Why are these insights so remarkable?

The new study findings are indeed groundbreaking: the fact that hearing aids can have a positive impact on cognition opens up a whole new world of possibilities in counseling patients with hearing loss in hearing care.

What do the latest insights imply for the future of hearing care?

The World Health Organization recommends regular hearing screening and prompt treatment after a hearing loss is detected. I see the WHO's approach and the latest evidence as an indication that with our approach at Sonova Audiological Care to focus on the holistic needs of our clients and recommending early hearing screenings, we are on the right track. Currently, it still takes an average of four years from noticing a change in hearing until the actual fitting of hearing aids.³ We have been talking for many years of hearing tests as part of the usual preventive health check-ups as we age. In line with the latest results of research, we advocate a holistic approach to hearing care, as this can have a positive influence on healthy aging.

And what does all of this mean for those who want to implement holistic hearing care?

First of all, we need to change the way we think and talk about the relevance of hearing health, and the impact of hearing care on overall wellbeing and quality of life. Clinical best practice implications are available that consider a patient-centered care involving the significant other, focussing on physical, emotional and social wellbeing.^{4,5,6} Also, we need to establish models for interprofessional collaboration between hearing care professionals, ENTs, and other healthcare providers to provide older adults with holistic hearing care services.

Even though it means a change in the way we practice hearing care today, I am convinced that these changes and putting hearing health in a broader context offers huge potential to increase motivation to seek hearing intervention earlier on.



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¹Lin, F. et al., (2023). Hearing intervention versus health education control to reduce cognitive decline in older adults with hearing loss in the USA (ACHIEVE): a multicentre, randomised controlled trial. The Lancet. Advanced online publication. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)01406-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)01406-X) ² Sarant, J. Z., Busby, P. A., Schembri, A. J., Harris, D. C., Fowler, C. (2023). ENHANCE: A Comparative prospective longitudinal study of cognitive outcomes after 3 years of hearing aid use in older adults. *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*, 15. DOI 10.3389/fnagi.2023.1302185. ³ Powers, T. A., & Carr, K. (2022). MarkeTrak 2022: Navigating the changing landscape of hearing healthcare. *Hearing Review*, 29(5), 12-17. ⁴ Sarant, J., Lemke, U., Giroud, N., Scherpiet, S., & Weinstein, B. (2023). Promoting hearing and cognitive health in audiologic rehabilitation for the well-being of older adults. *International Journal of Audiology*, 1-11. ⁵ Maidment, D. W., Wallhagen, M. I., Dowd, K., Mick, P., Piker, E., Spankovich, C., & Urry, E. (2023). New horizons in holistic, person-centred health promotion for hearing healthcare. *Age and Ageing*, 52(2), afad020. ⁶ Timmer, B. H., Bennett, R. J., Montano, J., Hickson, L., Weinstein, B., Wild, J., ... & Dyre, L. (2023). Social-emotional well-being and adult hearing loss: clinical recommendations. *International Journal of Audiology*, 1-12.