

Hard of hearing over-70s report memory loss and mental health problems in lockdown

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People with hearing difficulties experience heightened self-reported depression, loneliness, and memory problems during the COVID-19 lockdown, according to an online survey of the over 70s.

The study, published in the *International Journal of Audiology*, was carried out by experts at The University of Manchester, The University of Sheffield and Lancaster University.

Eighty people over seventy with mixed [hearing](#) abilities completed two detailed questionnaires, 12 weeks apart, during May and June 2020 when lockdown restrictions were in place.

The study was funded by Deafness Support Network (DSN), a Cheshire based charity, and supported by the NIHR Manchester Biomedical Research Centre (BRC) and NIHR Sheffield Biomedical Research Centre.

NIHR Manchester BRC bridges the gap between

new discoveries and individualized care through pioneering research. The BRC's Hearing Health theme is improving the lives of adults and children by preventing potentially devastating congenital deafness, diagnosing acquired age-related hearing deficits, and developing new treatments.

Lead author Dr. Jenna Littlejohn from The University of Manchester, DSN and NIHR Manchester BRC said: "Hearing loss, one of the leading causes of disability in older adults, is already commonly associated with increased rates of depression, [social isolation](#), and risk of dementia and cognitive decline.

"However this study shows that these problems are even more acute during the lockdown for people over 70, who were among the 'clinically vulnerable' people asked to shield."

She added: "Because we were not able to conduct face to face interviews during the lockdown, this study was clearly not able to estimate the effects of the pandemic on the over seventies without internet access.

"However, it would be logical to suspect that these negative associations could be even stronger in people who do not have access to the internet as they may be even more socially isolated: video calls have been lifelines for many."

Cancelation of medical appointments, the use of face masks and the limitation in the use of technology due to hearing loss are thought to all be important factors.

Many routine face-to-face audiology appointments have been postponed, suspended, or offered remotely.

Face masks act as a direct barrier to communication and are particularly problematic for people with hearing loss who also rely on lip reading and facial expression.

And the enforced social distancing means people with hearing loss might struggle to use telephone and video calls to stay in touch with family and friends.

Around 70% of people over the age of 70 have hearing loss according to the World Health Organisation. The 8.3 million people in the UK with the condition are likely, argue the team, to be selectively disadvantaged by the coronavirus pandemic.

Dr. Littlejohn said: "We suspect the use of face coverings and limited group meetings may remain for a while yet, and so our work into the longer-term collateral effects of the pandemic is ongoing.

"We need to ensure people with [hearing loss](#) get the correct support from health and social care professionals in terms of supporting mental health and investigating the risk of cognitive impairment due to the enforced social isolation on these people.

"The more data we have, the better we can inform the health and social care professionals who are responsible for them."

More information: Jenna Littlejohn et al. Self-reported hearing difficulties are associated with loneliness, depression and cognitive dysfunction during the COVID-19 pandemic, *International Journal of Audiology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/14992027.2021.1894492](#)

Provided by University of Manchester

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