

Childhood Speech Impairment Is Linked to Increased Dementia Risk Later in Life

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CONTEXT

About 5% of U.S. children experience a speech disorder, but it is often underdiagnosed and overlooked. These children are more likely to face educational, occupational, and social disadvantages that may accumulate over decades and impact cognitive health in old age. This study examines how childhood speech impairment relates to dementia risk and what factors help explain that link.

5%

of children in the U.S. experience a speech disorder between ages 3-17

3%

of U.S. adults ages 50+ had a speech impairment before age 16

63%

higher risk of developing dementia for adults who had a speech impairment as children, compared to those who did not

KEY FINDINGS

- In their fifties and sixties, adults who had a speech problem as children were more likely to feel depressed and to struggle with daily tasks like bathing and dressing. They also tended to have less wealth and more heart problems.
- These differences explain only a small part of the higher dementia risk. Depression mattered most, but still explained only about 5%.
- Even after accounting for all of these things, the risk of dementia was still 45% higher than for adults who did not have a speech problem as children.

45%

higher risk of dementia remained even after accounting for wealth, heart health, and depression in midlife

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR POLICY

- Standardize speech screenings in pediatric care and schools
- Support early intervention that is frequent and intensive
- Identify children before problems compound

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO

- Connect children with speech services early
- For adults who had speech impairment as children, pay attention to cardiovascular and mental health, which can be treated long before dementia would develop

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