How Lupus Can Cause Hearing Issues

by ELENA ANCIRO

Lupus and Hearing Loss

For most of us, it’s easy to take our hearing for granted. Even before we were born, we heard the sound of our mother’s heartbeat. Every day afterward, our ears have helped us navigate and communicate with the world.

The ear is a fragile, complex system of parts that can be vulnerable to autoimmune diseases like lupus.

Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease (AIED)

The inner ear is a maze of tubes and passages, called the “labyrinth.” Inside the labyrinth, the cochlea, auditory nerve, and the vestibular carry out important inner ear functions.

According to the *American Hearing Research Foundation,* "autoimmune inner ear disease (AIED) is a syndrome of progressive hearing loss and/or dizziness that is caused by antibodies or immune cells which are attacking the inner ear."

The good news is that AIED is rare, occurring in only 1 percent of hearing loss patients.

Symptoms

In AIED, there is sudden hearing loss starting in one ear before progressing rapidly to the other. This can last weeks or months.

In most cases, hearing loss is accompanied by ringing, hissing, or roaring sounds (tinnitus), largely due to the cochlea and auditory nerve damage.

The vestibular, which maintains our balance by registering our body movements, can also be affected by AIED. Approximately 50 percent of patients report dizziness and unsteadiness as symptoms.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is based on the results of hearing and vestibular tests, blood tests, MRI scans, medical history, physical examination, and response to medications.

AIED mimics other conditions such as Meniere’s Disease, acoustic neuroma, and otis media, so diagnosis can be difficult. It is important that you approach your physician as soon as you detect any inner ear symptoms so a clear diagnosis can be made right away.

Treatment

The following treatments have proven effective in some AIED patients:

- Steroids (prednisone or dexamethasone)
- Cytoxan agents (cyclophosphamide or methotrexate)

A cochlear implant could be considered if drug treatment is unsuccessful. Hearing aids can also be prescribed during or after treatment.

Add Your Ears to Your Body Awareness Check List

Before every medical appointment, it’s helpful to take some time to reflect on how your body has been feeling so that you feel prepared to communicate with your physician. Don’t forget to add your hearing to the list!