

Common problem for older adults: Losing the five key senses

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Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

It's a well-known fact that aging can lead to losing one's senses: vision, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. In previous studies, researchers have learned about the consequences of experiencing a decline in a single sense. For example, losing senses of smell, vision, and hearing have all been linked to cognitive decline, poor mental health, and increased mortality. Losing the sense of taste can lead to poor nutrition and even

death in certain instances. However, until now little has been known about losing multiple senses. In a new study, researchers examined how often multisensory losses occur and what their impact on older adults might be.

In a study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, University of Chicago researchers analyzed data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), a population-based study of adults ages 57-85. The study collected information about the participants' senses of vision, touch, smell, hearing, and taste. The participants were also asked to rate their physical health.

The researchers reported several key findings:

- 94 percent of the participants experienced loss in at least one of their senses; 67 percent had two or more sensory losses. Of those with multisensory losses, 65 percent had substantial loss in at least one of their senses, and 22 percent experienced substantial loss in two or more senses.
- 74 percent of participants suffered impairment in their ability to taste, which was the most common sensory loss.
- 38 percent of participants had a sense of touch that was "fair;" 32 percent said it was "poor."
- 22 percent had smell impairment (19 percent fair/3 percent poor function).
- 14 percent had corrected distance vision that was "fair;" 6 percent said it was "poor."
- 13 percent rated their corrected hearing as "fair;" 5 percent said it was "poor."

Older age was linked to poorer function in all five senses; the largest differences were in hearing, vision, and smell. What's more, men had worse functioning for hearing, [smell](#), and taste than did

women—although men had better corrected [vision](#) than women. African Americans and Hispanics tended to have worse sensory function than Caucasians in all senses except hearing. Hispanics tended to have better function in taste than those from other groups.

The researchers said that losing more than one [sense](#) might explain why [older adults](#) report having a poorer quality of life and face challenges in interacting with other people and the world around them. The [researchers](#) suggested that further studies into multisensory loss hold promise for designing better programs to prevent or treat loss and to ease the suffering such losses cause.

More information: This summary is from "Global Sensory Impairment among Older Adults in the United States." It [appears online](#) ahead of print in the February 2016 issue of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

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