

Katie Johnson: Good morning and welcome to Apple a Day, Lake Region Healthcare's health and wellness show, where we feature news and information you can use to live a healthier life. I am Katie Johnson, your host, and my guest today is Dr. Courtney Fochs. She's an audiologist and one of the newest members of our team here at the Lake Region Healthcare Main Clinic to offer those much needed audiology services that Paul Sanderson has provided here for so many years. We wish him well in his retirement and are just really excited to welcome you to the team to continue, as I said, providing audiology services to our community at our clinic. Good morning, and thanks for joining me, Dr. Fochs.

Dr. Fochs: Oh well, good to be here. Thanks for having me.

Katie Johnson: Absolutely. Let's start by just letting our listeners get to know you a little bit better, learning more about you and your background. If you'd just share what your training and your background is, maybe even where you're from originally, to get us started.

Dr. Fochs: Okay. Well, I'm from a small town in central Wisconsin, I completed my bachelor's in communication sciences and disorders from the University of Wisconsin Madison. I originally thought I wanted to be a speech-language pathologist, but after I graduated I explored a few different paths in healthcare, trying to figure out exactly what I wanted to do. I was a caregiver in a group home setting for adults with disabilities in Wyoming and I was a CNA psych tech at a state hospital back in Madison for a while also. I was always interested in the audiology classes I took an undergrad and eventually decided to take the leap into getting my doctorate in audiology at Missouri State University.

Katie Johnson: Madison's a beautiful place, I was just there a couple of weeks ago. A great place to go to school too, the campus up there is so nice. How did you land on Missouri for your doctorate?

Dr. Fochs: Well, I applied to a few schools and Missouri State actually offered me an in-state scholarship, so I had to jump on that because tuition's expensive and it actually ended up being cheaper to go to Missouri than staying.

Katie Johnson: Wow. Yeah, you definitely have to take advantage of those opportunities. Let's talk a little bit about the kinds of services that you'll be offering at Lake Region Healthcare, and particularly if there's anything new or different from what people who've had audiology services here before have experienced.

Dr. Fochs: Well, starting off, I'm doing hearing evaluations for adults and then pediatrics over the age of five, hearing aid fittings with followups, adjustment appointments. I'm scheduled to get a new piece of equipment that helps with hearing aid verification during fittings, that's going to be something new that hasn't been here before. I do a lot of aural rehabilitation and some tinnitus management. I don't have any specific programs, but if you have any questions or just want some general information about tinnitus, I'm more than happy to

provide that. Hopefully, in the future, I can expand on what services are offered here.

Katie Johnson: When you're diagnosing and treating hearing issues. What are some of the first steps that you take with a patient? Are there, I would assume, interventions that you try before trying hearing aids? What does that look like?

Dr. Fochs: Well, the first step in diagnosing or treating hearing loss for me is getting a good case history from the patient. What they tell me about their problems and themselves gives me the right direction in which to help them. Another first step too is getting that hearing evaluation, making recommendations on your specific hearing loss and what that all entails, interventions before suggesting hearing aids. Well, hearing aids are kind of a good starting point for treating hearing loss, can't really fix the hearing loss, but it does help manage it.

Katie Johnson: Sure.

Dr. Fochs: But if someone can't afford a hearing aid, they are quite expensive, I might suggest an assistive device, like a pocket talker or counsel the person on communication strategies that they could use.

Katie Johnson: Sure. You make a really good point there, that once hearing loss happens, I mean, it's lost. It's not like we can cure that, but thank goodness for some of these advancements that help us to be able to still communicate with that hearing loss. What about issues besides hearing? You mentioned a couple of them that are reasons someone might need to see an audiologist.

Dr. Fochs: Other issues that someone might experience and might need an audiologist for, tinnitus management. Someone can have completely normal hearing and still have ringing in their ears. I'm one of those people who have completely normal hearing and experience tinnitus, but there are ways that you can manage it and I can help discuss those with you. Vestibular balance testing. The inner ear has two parts, the cochlea, which is more or less the hearing organ, and then you have the semicircular canals, which are the balance organ. Certain audiologists specialize in vestibular testing, and it can help diagnose what might be going on in there. Another one is auditory processing testing. You can also have completely "normal" hearing on the basic evaluation test, but if you still have issues with speech and noise or just how someone processes the speech signal coming in, there are also audiologists that specialized in doing that testing,

Katie Johnson: That's really interesting. I want to go back to the ringing in the ears, that is a common problem for a lot of people. What causes that?

Dr. Fochs: There's a lot of different causes and there's no one real catch-all. A big one is thought to be related to hearing loss, damage to what we call the hair cells inside the cochlea, but that might be that they're misfiring and they're sending that signal up to the brain. There have been, I think it's fMRI studies done in the

past where they've taken people who experience tinnitus and those who don't, and people who experience it have different areas lit up than those who don't. There've been people who have been so desperate to get rid of their ringing that they've severed the auditory nerve and they still hear it.

Katie Johnson: Wow.

Dr. Fochs: So it's not necessarily in the ear, it's just this phantom sound perception. It can also be caused by blood flow issues. Your diet can affect it, so too much caffeine, too much sodium, all those things. Stress can play into it too.

Katie Johnson: Sure. Wow, very complex. I'm sure that if someone's experiencing it, to have someone like you help narrow it down and start the treatment process has to be a real relief.

I wanted to mention children. You indicated that you'll provide services for kids five and up. When we think about kids, I'm sure it's like anything else, identifying a problem early is probably really important. What should we watch for? Besides the regular hearing tests that they get in school, are there things that indicate a child might have hearing issues that we, as parents or teachers or those who are around kids, could help identify?

Dr. Fochs: Parents should really watch for signs of an ear infection, so signs like fever, ear pain, ear drainage. They should also watch how a child reacts and responds to them. If your child just isn't responding to their name, they might have something going on other than just not listening to you. Then pay attention how they're doing in school, along with speech development and that kind of stuff. If your child does have a lot of those issues with speech development, not doing well in school, it could possibly be an auditory processing disorder, which you should seek out someone who specializes in that if you do want that testing done.

Katie Johnson: Just in general, when is it time to get help from an audiologist? I would guess maybe it's other people who notice you need it first, is that common?

Dr. Fochs: Yeah. Well, actually one of the main statements I get is, "My insert family member," usually a spouse, "says I can't hear," which more than likely not the family member is correct, even if you don't want to admit it. If you notice that you're not able to understand as well, if others tend to mumble their words, if you turn the TV to a higher volume than it used to be, do you avoid situations because you have a harder time following conversations, if you've used to go out to dinner with friends regularly and now you don't because you had a hard time following the conversation at a table, just withdrawing from activities you used to do.

Katie Johnson: What about for people who are maybe recognizing that these things are happening, but they're really reluctant to seek help or to see an audiologist?

Sometimes I hear it from people is it's just simply because they don't want a hearing aid.

Dr. Fochs: Well, if you're starting to notice this and you're reluctant, I'd say to still come in for hearing evaluation. If nothing else, it gives your provider a good baseline to be able to monitor if you do think you have a change in hearing in the future. Then that way you can also just seek out more information or ask me about different strategies you might use in order to not quite take that step. Another thing I really stress too is hearing aids are a commitment. If you're not ready to wear them, you're not going to wear them.

Katie Johnson: That's a good point.

Dr. Fochs: I don't want to pressure anyone into purchasing hearing aids if they're not ready, because I don't want them to have a negative experience and then not want to go back to trying them in the future.

Katie Johnson: Sure.

Dr. Fochs: I would rather wait for you to be more ready because they're not cheap and it's something you have to really be committed to wearing, because we say it usually takes your brain about a good month of good, consistent wear at least eight hours a day.

Katie Johnson: That's good advice. I think another thing that I've noticed just from people that I've talked to recently, hearing aids have changed a lot and maybe some people don't realize how small and inconspicuous and really high tech, things you can control from your phone on a hearing aid, so maybe just taking some time to learn about how they've changed could be beneficial too.

Dr. Fochs: Yeah, definitely.

Katie Johnson: Yeah. What about tips for hearing loss prevention? We always like to focus on prevention and ways we can be healthier and offer our listeners tips for that as well. What are some of your top recommendations for people to maybe stay out of your office, to not have to see an audiologist, or at least not as early in life?

Dr. Fochs: My main thing is wear your hearing protection. If you have loud hobbies, like shooting firearms, if you mow the lawn, if you use power tools, go to concerts, anything like that, just wear your hearing protection, because once you lose it, you're not getting it back. Keep what you have. Another one we're big on too is don't use Q-tips because when you go to try to clean your ear, instead of taking the wax out, it just packs it in more. I've heard one analogy of it being kind of like a muzzle loader, where we're just packing it into deeper. If you do that and you pack all your wax in, you're not going to hear as well either.

Katie Johnson: Any advice on what to do instead?

Dr. Fochs: Well, for most people, the ear canal is just a self-cleaning system. It's supposed to gradually just shed that skin and come on out. If you are someone who deals with wax impaction, come into your primary care, get your ears cleaned out, or the ENT.

Katie Johnson: What is it that you most enjoy about this field, about audiology?

Dr. Fochs: I get the privilege of assisting those with hearing loss and helping ease communication efforts. While I can't restore what hearing's been lost, I am able to help provide the tools and counseling that will allow someone more accessibility in communicating.

Katie Johnson: Sure. I bet you hear some amazing stories, once people realize what a difference it can make.

Dr. Fochs: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I've had a lot of patients before who have never worn hearing aids before, it's their first fitting, and they go to leave and they get in their car and they forget that the car makes a noise when you turn the turn signal on and they think their car broke.

Katie Johnson: Wow.

Dr. Fochs: Just little things like that, that people get used to not hearing. Then once you're given those hearing aids, there it is all at once.

Katie Johnson: There it is, all back. Neat, I bet that's great. How about when you're not working? What do you like to do in your spare time?

Dr. Fochs: Well, I do like to read a lot of just books. This last year, I've gotten more into cooking and baking, which I think is probably common with COVID.

Katie Johnson: Yeah, it's very common, yeah.

Dr. Fochs: I do really enjoy hunting and fishing with my dad back home in Wisconsin. I enjoy going to sporting events, like Badger football and basketball games, and concerts, where I do wear my hearing protection.

Katie Johnson: Good.

Dr. Fochs: Traveling is something I do a lot too, and I'm looking forward to hopefully doing more of that in the future hopefully.

Katie Johnson: Yeah, hopefully. I think we all have that hope as well. I should have asked you this earlier, but how did you land in Fergus Falls? Any connections to this area, or what brought you here?

Dr. Fochs: Well, it was a nonprofit hospital and I knew that that was more the route I wanted to go.

Katie Johnson: Mm-hmm (affirmative), just a good fit?

Dr. Fochs: Yeah. I was pretty open to going anywhere, besides very deep South, it's a little hot down there for me.

Katie Johnson: Well, this shouldn't be a too big of a stretch from Central Wisconsin.

Dr. Fochs: No.

Katie Johnson: Hopefully, you enjoy Fergus Falls and are enjoying a warm welcome so far. We're certainly glad to have you here on our team.

Well, thank you so much for taking some time to chat with us and letting us introduce you to our listeners this morning.

Dr. Fochs: Well, thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Katie Johnson: Again, Dr. Courtney Fochs, audiologist, joining our team here at the Main Clinic at Lake Region Healthcare. Again, bringing back audiology services after Paul Sanderson's retirement. Glad to have you on the team, welcome to Lake Region Healthcare. Welcome to Fergus Falls, and thanks for being on the show today. Dr. Courtney Fochs and Katie Johnson on Apple a Day reminding you there is so much to do here, stay healthy for it. Have a great day.