

The family library

APHASIA



What is Aphasia?

Aphasia is a condition that robs people of the ability to communicate. Aphasia can affect the ability to express and understand language, both verbal and written.

Aphasia typically occurs suddenly after a stroke or a head injury. But it can also come on gradually from a slowly growing brain tumor or a degenerative disease. The amount of disability depends on the location and the severity of the brain damage.

Once the underlying cause has been treated, the primary treatment for aphasia is speech therapy that focuses on relearning and practicing language skills and using alternative or supplementary communication methods. Family members often participate in the therapy process and function as communication partners of the person with aphasia.

Symptoms

Aphasia is a sign of some other condition, such as a stroke or a brain tumor.

A person with aphasia may:

- Speak in short or incomplete sentences
- Speak in sentences that don't make sense
- Speak unrecognizable words
- Not comprehend other people's conversation
- Interpret figurative language literally
- Write sentences that don't make sense

APHASIA (cont.)



The severity and scope of the problems depend on the extent of damage and the area of the brain affected. Some people may comprehend what others say relatively well but struggle to find words to speak. Other people may be able to understand what they read but yet can't speak so that others can understand them.

Types of aphasia

Doctors may refer to aphasia as nonfluent, fluent or global:

- **Nonfluent aphasia.** Damage to the language network near the left frontal area of the brain usually results in Broca aphasia, which is also called nonfluent aphasia. People with this disorder struggle to get words out, speak in very short sentences and leave out words. A person might say "Want food" or "Walk park today." Although the sentences aren't complete, a listener can usually understand the meaning. A person with Broca aphasia may comprehend what other people say to some degree. People with this type of aphasia are often aware of their own difficulty in communicating and may get frustrated with these limitations. Additionally, people with Broca aphasia may also have right-sided paralysis or weakness.
- **Fluent aphasia.** Wernicke aphasia is the result of damage to the language network in the middle left side of the brain. It's often called fluent aphasia. People with this form of aphasia may speak fluently in long, complex sentences that don't make sense or include unrecognizable, incorrect or unnecessary words. They usually don't comprehend spoken language well and often don't realize that others can't understand what they're saying.
- **Global aphasia.** Global aphasia results from extensive damage to the brain's language networks. People with global aphasia have severe disabilities with expression and comprehension.

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When to see a doctor

Because aphasia is often a sign of a serious problem such as a stroke, people should seek emergency medical care if they suddenly develop:

- Difficulty speaking
- Trouble comprehending speech
- Difficulty with word recall
- Problems with reading or writing

Diagnosis

Doctors will likely request an imaging test, such as a computerized tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), to quickly identify what's causing the aphasia.

Other tests and informal observations to assess your language skills may be performed, such as the ability to:

- Name common objects
- Engage in a conversation
- Understand and use words correctly
- Answer questions about something read or heard
- Repeat words and sentences
- Follow instructions
- Answer yes-no questions and respond to open-ended questions about common subjects
- Tell a story or explain the plot of a story
- Explain a joke or a figurative phrase, such as "I need to unwind"
- Read and write letters, words and sentences

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Treatment

If the brain damage is mild, a person may recover language skills without treatment. However, most people undergo speech and language therapy to rehabilitate their language skills and supplement their communication experiences. Researchers are currently investigating the use of medications, alone or in combination with speech therapy, to help people with aphasia, but there are currently no medicines to treat aphasia.

Speech and Language Rehabilitation

Recovery of language skills is usually a relatively slow process. Although most people make significant progress, few people regain full pre-injury communication levels. In aphasia, speech and language therapy:

- **Starts early.** Therapy is most effective when it begins soon after the brain injury.
- **Builds on success.** The speech-language pathologist uses exercises to improve and practice communication skills. These may begin with simpler tasks such as naming objects and evolve into more complex exercises of explaining the purpose of an object.
- **Shifts focus.** The speech-language pathologist might teach the person ways to compensate for the language impairment and to communicate more effectively with gestures or drawings. Some people with aphasia may use a book or board with pictures and words to help them recall commonly used words or help them when they're stuck.
- **Often works in groups.** In a group setting, people with aphasia can try out their communication skills in a safe environment. Participants can practice initiating conversations, speaking in turn, clarifying misunderstandings and fixing conversations that have completely broken down.
- **May include outings.** Participating in real-life situations — such as going to a restaurant or a grocery store — puts rehabilitation efforts into practice.
- **May include use of computers.** Using computer-assisted therapy can be especially helpful for relearning verbs and word sounds (phonemes).

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Coping and Support

For those who have aphasia, the following tips may help to communicate with others:

- Carry a card explaining that you have aphasia and what aphasia is.
- Carry identification and information on how to contact significant others.
- Carry a pencil and a small pad of paper with you at all times.
- Use drawings, diagrams or photos as shortcuts.
- Use gestures or point to objects.

Family and friends

Family members and friends can use the following tips when communicating with a person with aphasia:

- Simplify your sentences and slow down your pace.
- Keep conversations one-on-one initially.
- Allow the person time to talk.
- Don't finish sentences or correct errors.
- Reduce distracting noise in the environment.
- Keep paper and pencils or pens readily available.
- Write a key word or a short sentence to help explain something.
- Help the person with aphasia create a book of words, pictures and photos to assist with conversations.
- Use drawings or gestures when you aren't understood.
- Involve the person with aphasia in conversations as much as possible.
- Check for comprehension or summarize what you've discussed.

Support groups

Local chapters of such organizations as the [National Aphasia Association](#), the [American Stroke Association](#), the [American Heart Association](#) and some medical centers may offer support groups for people with aphasia and others affected by the disorder. These groups provide people with a sense of community, a place to air frustrations and learn coping strategies. Ask your doctor or speech-language pathologist if he or she knows of any local support groups.

For more information on aphasia click [HERE](#).