

Aphasia

KEY POINTS

- Aphasia is a problem with being able to speak, understand the spoken word, read, and write. It is caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control how we use language.
 - Speech therapy can help if you are having problems with speaking and other language skills. How much symptoms improve is related to the cause and severity of the brain damage, the area of the brain that was damaged, and your age and health.
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What is aphasia?

Aphasia is a problem with being able to speak, understand the spoken word, read, and write. It is not a problem with thinking. It is a problem with being able to express yourself and understand others.

What is the cause?

Aphasia is caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control how we use language. This is usually a result of:

- A stroke
- A head injury
- A brain tumor
- A serious infection in the brain

What are the symptoms of aphasia?

Symptoms may include:

- Not understanding words
- Not being able to say the names of people or objects
- Not being able to find the words to say what you want to say
- Not being able to follow along with a conversation
- Not being able to understand what you read
- Having trouble writing down your thoughts clearly

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Your provider may talk to your family or caregivers. You may have tests such as:

- A neurological exam, which includes simple tests to check your balance and walking, speech and memory, face and eye movements, muscle strength and reflexes, and your ability to see, hear, taste, and smell
- A CT scan, which uses X-rays and a computer to show detailed pictures of the brain
- An MRI, which uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to show detailed pictures of the brain

If your healthcare provider thinks you may have aphasia, you may be referred to a speech-language therapist.

How is it treated?

The symptoms of aphasia often improve in the first 2 or 3 months depending on the cause, such as after a stroke. Some people continue to improve over several years. How much symptoms improve is related to:

- The cause of the brain injury
- The area of the brain that was damaged
- How severely the brain was damaged
- Your age and health

Speech therapy can help if you are having problems with speaking and other language skills. Speech therapy can be done in a hospital or skilled nursing facility, in a clinic, or at home. A speech therapist will test you and plan to help you with certain speech and language skills. Aphasia does not affect everyone the same way, so the treatment plan will be designed just for you.

Types of exercises that may be used are:

- Language exercises: During these exercises, the therapist may model the correct way to form a sentence and say words. The therapist will have you repeat words, phrases, and sentences.
- Articulation exercises: Articulation means the making of sounds. The therapist will show you how to make certain sounds with your mouth and tongue. You may use a mirror to watch how your mouth and tongue are moving.
- Relaxation and breathing exercises: Breathing techniques and relaxation exercises can help you relax the muscles you use to speak and breathe.
- Art therapy or linking pictures with words

Speech therapists may also work closely with people who are helping to care for you to teach them the best ways to communicate with you.

How can I help take care of someone with aphasia?

- Go to therapy sessions with the person, if possible.
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Ask yes or no questions.
- Give clear, simple choices so the person can select the best answer such as whether to wear blue shirt or a yellow shirt.

- Repeat words or write down words to help make the meaning clear if needed.
- Speak slowly, but talk to the person as an adult, rather than as you would to a child. Make eye contact when you speak to the person.
- Reduce distractions. For example, turn off the radio or TV when you need to talk to the person.
- Include the person in conversations, even if they don't always respond.
- Ask the person for their opinions and show that you value what they say.
- Encourage all forms of communication: talking, using gestures, pointing to pictures or objects, singing, or drawing.
- Don't try to correct the person's speech.
- Give the person plenty of time to express what he or she wants to say.
- Consider joining a support group. Support groups can help by sharing common concerns and solutions to problems with others in the same situation.

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