

How aphasia affects your loved one

Aphasia can have a big impact on relationships with friends and family. But there's good news. Research has shown that stroke survivors with aphasia can improve given time and interventions, even 15 to 20 years after a stroke. Friends and family members can help with patience and support.

What to understand about aphasia

Aphasia primarily impacts speech, but comprehension, reading and writing can also be affected, making it challenging for survivors to communicate and navigate daily life.

- Aphasia does not affect a survivor's intelligence.
- Survivors with aphasia typically know what they want to say. They just may not be able to say it.
- All forms of aphasia affect a survivor's ability to produce and retrieve words or names.
- Depending on the area and extent of the brain injury, aphasia can range from mild (trouble coming up with certain words) to severe (a complete inability to speak or understand what others are saying).
- For some, recovery goals are less about getting speech back and more about adapting communication and engaging with family, friends and their community, participating in activities they find rewarding and enjoyable.
- Other methods of communication besides speech can be helpful (e.g., gestures and drawings or using photos or maps).
- There are several types of aphasia with varying effects on communication processes:

Global aphasia. Survivors may speak few recognizable words and understand little spoken language and can't read or write.

Broca's aphasia. Survivors produce little coherent speech, often speaking in fewer than four words. The survivor may understand speech and read, even though writing is difficult.

Mixed non-fluent aphasia. Speech is halting, and speech comprehension is limited. Writing or reading past the elementary school level is unlikely.

Wernicke's aphasia. Survivors have the most trouble understanding spoken words. Their speech may be marked by jargon or nonsensical words. Writing and reading are also often severely impaired.

Anomic aphasia. Speech comprehension and reading are less affected, while finding words, especially the right nouns and verbs, is a challenge.

To be a good communication partner:

- Set communication rules. When your family member is struggling with speech, you'll know when it's OK to step in and help.
- Start small. You might move from communicating with your loved one with no speech to working your way up to them saying two or three words.
- Praise all speaking attempts and be careful not to criticize grammatical errors.
- If you don't understand what your loved one said, don't fake it. Acknowledge the difficulty, be patient and try again.
- Yes or no questions are often easier than open-ended questions.
- Use simple words and sentences, speak slowly, add pauses where appropriate and make eye contact.
- Keep props like a pen and paper, maps, calendars or even pictures and photos handy to help with comprehension.

Communicating with a survivor with aphasia isn't one size fits all. Different strategies work for different people, so vary your tools and your methods for the best results.

