

### Introduction

Stuttering is a speech disorder in which sounds, syllables, or words are repeated or prolonged. This affects the normal flow of speech.

Approximately 5 percent of all children will stutter for some period in their life, lasting from a few weeks to several years. Stuttering can make it difficult to communicate with other people, which often affects a person's quality of life.

This reference summary reviews stuttering. It includes information about the causes of stuttering and how the condition is diagnosed and treated.



### Stuttering

Stuttering is a problem that affects the flow of speech. Sounds, syllables, or words are repeated or drawn out when people who stutter talk.

As people who stutter struggle to speak and communicate, they may blink their eyes rapidly, have lip tremors, or show other signs of physical struggle. These are called “struggling behaviors.”

Stuttering often affects a person's quality of life. This is because stuttering can make it difficult to communicate with other people.

Stuttering develops most often in children between the ages of 2 and 5 as they are developing their language skills. Most children outgrow stuttering. About 1 percent or less of adults stutter.

Boys are more likely to stutter than girls.



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## Symptoms

The symptoms of stuttering include speech problems and struggling behaviors. Both types of symptoms affect communication.

People who stutter may have a hard time starting a word or sentence. Stuttering may also cause a person to repeat a sound, a syllable, or word.

The speech problems caused by stuttering may also happen with some struggling behaviors. Struggling behaviors include rapid eye blinks and tremors of the lips or jaw. Some people also experience tension, tightness or movement of the face or upper body.

Stuttering can be affected by a person's emotions. Stuttering may become worse when a person is excited, tired, or under stress. It also may become worse when a person is feeling self conscious.



Stuttering can become very difficult during social situations. Examples include speaking in front of a group or talking on the telephone. However, singing, reading, or speaking along with a group may temporarily reduce stuttering.

Children between the ages of 2 and 5 commonly stutter. It is a normal part of learning to speak for most children, and usually gets better on its own. However not all stuttering goes away on its own. Stuttering that continues or causes emotional distress should be treated.

You should call your child's healthcare provider if the stuttering:

- Continues for more than six months
- Becomes more frequent
- Is accompanied by facial tension or tightness
- Is accompanied by other facial or body movements
- Affects schoolwork
- Limits social interactions
- Causes your child to be afraid of situations in which he or she will have to talk
- Continues beyond age 5
- First becomes noticeable when he or she begins reading aloud in school

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If you are an adult who stutters, you should seek help if the condition makes you feel stressed or anxious. You should also seek help if your stuttering affects your self-esteem, career, or relationships. Many programs are available to treat adult stuttering.

## Causes

Although not fully understood, there are three types of stuttering. The two most common are developmental stuttering and neurogenic stuttering. Psychogenic stuttering is the third type, but it is rare.



Developmental stuttering develops in young children while they are still learning speech and language skills. It is the most common form of stuttering. Developmental stuttering runs in families.

Neurogenic stuttering happens when the brain has difficulty coordinating the brain's signals to the nerves or muscles. It may develop after a stroke, head trauma, or other type of brain injury. Neurogenic stuttering can cause a person with no stuttering problems previously to suddenly develop stuttering.

Psychogenic stuttering is caused by emotional trauma or problems with thought or reasoning. It is rare.

## Diagnosis

Stuttering is usually diagnosed by a speech-language pathologist. This healthcare professional is trained to test and treat individuals with voice, speech, and language disorders.

The speech-language pathologist considers many factors, including:

- The patient's history, such as when the stuttering was first noticed and under what circumstances
- An analysis of the stuttering behaviors
- An evaluation of speech and language abilities
- The impact of stuttering on the patient's life



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When evaluating a young child for stuttering, a speech-language pathologist will try to predict if the child is likely to continue his or her stuttering behavior or outgrow it.

To determine whether the child will outgrow stuttering, the speech-language pathologist will consider such factors as the family's history of stuttering. He or she will also consider whether the child's stuttering has lasted six months or longer and whether the child exhibits other speech or language problems.

## **Risk Factors**

There are some factors that put people at a greater risk for stuttering. For example, having a relative who stutters may increase your risk for stuttering. Stuttering frequently runs in families.

A delay in childhood development may also increase your risk for stuttering. Children who have not reached certain developmental milestones are more likely to stutter.

Children who have other speech problems also have an increased risk for stuttering.

Being male may increase your risk for stuttering. Men are more likely to stutter than woman.



Stress is also a risk factor for stuttering. A stressful home life can worsen stuttering.

## **Treatment**

Treatment for stuttering depends on a person's age, communication goals, and other factors. If you or your child stutters, it is important to work with a speech-language pathologist to determine the best treatment options.

For very young children, early treatment may prevent developmental stuttering from becoming a lifelong problem. Certain strategies can help children learn to improve their speech. These strategies may also help children develop positive attitudes toward communication.



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Many of the current therapies include speaking more slowly, regulating breathing, or gradually moving from single-syllable sounds to longer words and more complex sentences.

Most therapies for stuttering also help treat the anxiety a person who stutters may feel in certain speaking situations.

No drugs have been approved for the treatment of stuttering. However, some drugs that are approved to treat health problems like epilepsy, anxiety, or depression have been used to treat stuttering.

Self-help groups provide a way for people who stutter to find resources and support as they face the challenges of stuttering.

### **Tips to Help Your Child**

There are some things parents can do to help their child become more comfortable with speaking. The following section lists some tips for parents of children who stutter.

Make talking fun. Don't force your child to speak correctly all of the time. Allow your child the opportunity to enjoy a conversation without becoming self-conscious about his or her stutter.

Make family mealtime a time for conversation.  
Turn off the TV and avoid other distractions.  
Focus on what your child has to say, not the way he or she is saying it.

Don't criticize or correct your child when he or she talks. Saying comments like "slow down" or "take a deep breath" can make your child feel more self-conscious.



Avoid having your child speak or read aloud when he or she is uncomfortable or when the stuttering increases. Instead, encourage activities that do not require a lot of talking during these times.

When you talk to your child, use a clear and calm voice. Try to speak slowly. Also do this when talking to another person in the presence of your child.

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When listening to your child stutter, try to maintain eye contact. Do not look away or appear frustrated. Your nonverbal communication tells your child just as much about the way you feel as the things you say.

Always let your child finish his or her own sentences. Do not speak for your child, even when you know what he or she is trying to say. When responding to something your child says, take time to pause and consider what they told you.

You can help your child become more comfortable with speech by being a patient and considerate listener. Remember that this is a frustrating time for your child. Emotional support is very important to his or her development.

## **Summary**

Stuttering is a speech disorder in which sounds, syllables, or words are repeated or prolonged. This affects the normal flow of speech.

Stuttering can affect anyone. However, it is most common in young children who are still learning to speak.

You can help your child become more comfortable with speech by being a patient and considerate listener. Remember that this is a frustrating time for your child. Emotional support and having opportunities to speak without criticism is very important to his or her development.

Many of the current therapies for teens and adults who stutter focus on learning ways to minimize stuttering when they speak, such as by speaking more slowly, regulating their breathing, or gradually moving from single-syllable sounds to longer words and more complex sentences.



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