

## Introduction

Aphasia is a disorder caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control language. It can make it hard for you to read, write and say what you mean to say.

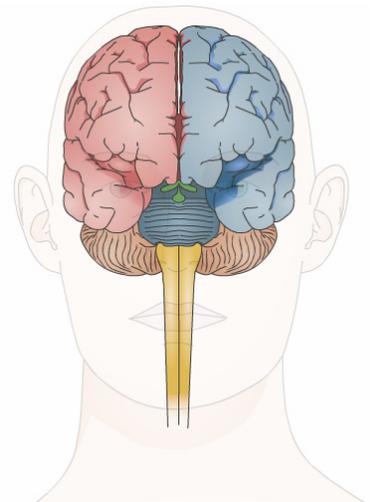
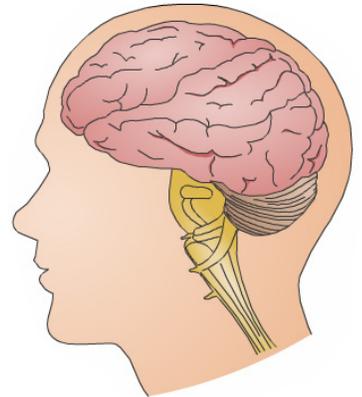
Aphasia is most common in adults who have had a stroke. Brain tumors, infections, injuries and dementia can also cause it. The type of problem you have and how bad it is depends on which part of your brain is damaged. It also depends on how much damage there is.

This reference summary explains the symptoms, causes and treatment of aphasia. It also includes information about health complications related to the condition.

## The Brain

The brain is the command center of the body. It controls the five senses, as well as the ability to speak and move. The brain has two main parts, called the left and the right hemispheres. Each hemisphere has areas for movement, thinking, sensations and feelings. If you injure your brain, different functions can be affected.

In most humans, the left hemisphere of the brain contains the specialized language areas. Damage to a part of the brain that helps with language could make it hard for you to read, write and say what you mean to say. This type of disorder is known as aphasia.



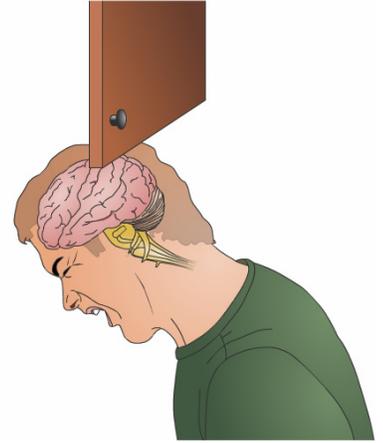
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## Aphasia

Aphasia is a symptom that results from damage to the parts of the brain that are responsible for language. For most people, these are areas on the left side, or hemisphere, of the brain.

Aphasia usually happens suddenly. It often happens as the result of a stroke or head injury. It may also develop slowly if it is caused by a brain tumor, an infection or dementia. Dementia is a condition in which a person loses the ability to think, remember, learn, make decisions and solve problems. Symptoms may also include personality changes and emotional problems.



Aphasia impairs the expression and understanding of language. It also affects reading and writing. Aphasia may happen along with other speech disorders, which also result from brain damage.

Anyone can develop aphasia, including children. But most people who have aphasia are middle-aged or older. Men and women are equally affected by aphasia. Hundreds of thousands of people develop aphasia each year. Many of these people develop aphasia as the result of a stroke.

There are three main types of Aphasia:

- Nonfluent aphasia, also known as Broca's aphasia.
- Fluent aphasia, also known as Wernicke's aphasia.
- Global aphasia.



Nonfluent aphasia happens when the left frontal area of the brain is damaged. This area of the brain is part of the language network. People with nonfluent aphasia have trouble speaking. They struggle with words and may only speak in short sentences. They may leave words out of a sentence.

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People with nonfluent aphasia might say “Shop mall today” to mean they want to go shopping at the mall. Or “Want TV” to mean they want to watch TV. The sentences aren’t complete and the words may not be clear.

Fluent aphasia happens when the middle or temporal part of the left side of the brain is damaged. People with this type of aphasia may use long, complex sentences that don't make sense. They may use unclear, incorrect or unneeded words. People with fluent aphasia often cannot understand spoken language well. They may not know that people have trouble understanding the things that they say. They may say something like, "You know that smoodle pinkered, and that I want to get him round and take care of him like you want before."

Global aphasia happens after the language network of the brain suffers extensive damage. Often the front and middle regions of the left hemisphere of the brain are damaged. People with global aphasia are severely limited in their ability to speak or understand language.

## Causes

Aphasia is caused by damage to one or more of the language areas of the brain. Many times, the cause of the brain injury is a stroke. A stroke happens when blood is not able to reach a part of the brain. Brain cells die when they do not get a normal supply of blood. Blood is important to all parts of the body because it carries oxygen and important nutrients.

Other causes of brain injury leading to aphasia are:

- Severe blows to the head.
- Brain tumors.
- Brain infections.
- Other conditions that affect the brain.

## Diagnosis

Aphasia is often first recognized by the health care provider who treats the person for his or her brain injury. This is often a neurologist. A neurologist is a health care provider who specializes in disorders of the nervous system. A neurologist is trained to diagnose and treat neurological disorders.



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The health care provider usually does tests that require the person to:

- Follow commands.
- Answer questions.
- Name objects.
- Carry on a conversation.

A person with aphasia is often referred to a speech-language pathologist. This health care provider will fully examine the person's communication abilities.



A full examination includes the person's ability to:

- Speak.
- Express ideas.
- Converse socially.
- Understand language.
- Read and write.

The exam also looks at the patient's ability to use alternative and augmentative communication, or AAC. AAC includes all forms of communication other than oral speech that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants and ideas. We all use AAC when we make facial expressions or gestures, use symbols or pictures or write.

## **Treatment**

In some cases, a person will suddenly and completely recover from aphasia without treatment. This type of recovery usually happens after a type of stroke in which blood flow to the brain is temporarily stopped but quickly restored. In these circumstances, language abilities may return in a few hours or a few days.

For most cases of aphasia, language recovery is not as quick or as complete. Many people with aphasia experience partial spontaneous recovery. This is when some language abilities return a few days to a month after the brain injury. But some amount of aphasia typically remains. In these instances, speech-language therapy is often helpful. Recovery usually continues over a two-year period. The most effective treatment begins early in the recovery process.

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Some things that affect the amount of improvement include:

- The cause of the brain damage.
- The area of the brain that was damaged.
- The extent of the brain injury.
- The age and health of the person.

Additional factors include motivation and educational level.

Aphasia therapy aims to improve a person's ability to communicate. This is done by helping him or her to:

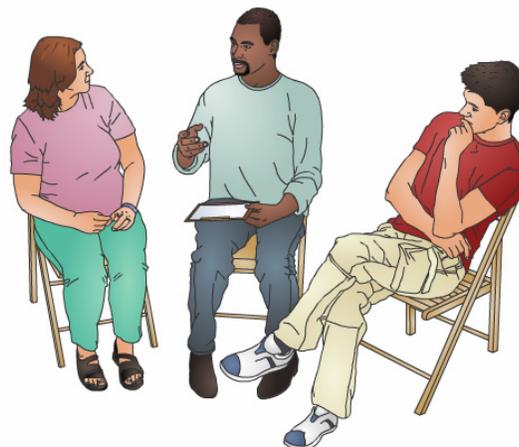
- Use remaining language abilities.
- Restore language abilities as much as possible.
- Compensate for language problems.
- Learn other methods of communicating.

Individual therapy focuses on the specific needs of the person. Group therapy offers the opportunity to use new communication skills in a small-group setting.

Stroke clubs are regional support groups made up of people who have had a stroke. They are available in most major cities. These clubs also offer the chance for people with aphasia to try new communication skills.

Stroke clubs can help entire families adjust to the life changes that accompany stroke and aphasia. Family involvement is often an important part of aphasia treatment. It helps family members learn the best way to communicate with their loved one. It is also important to allow people with aphasia plenty of time to talk. Help the person become involved socially outside the home.

Other treatment approaches involve the use of computers to improve the language abilities of people with aphasia. Computer assisted therapy can help people with aphasia retrieve certain parts of speech, such as the use of verbs.



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## Complications

Aphasia may affect a person's quality of life. It can cause problems because communication is so much a part of your life.

Communication difficulty may affect your:

- Job.
- Relationships.
- Day-to-day function.

Language barriers may lead to embarrassment, depression and relationship problems.

## Coping and Support

If you are affected by aphasia, there are certain things you can do to help improve your quality of life.

Try carrying a card explaining that you have aphasia. The card should also explain what aphasia is. You can show it to people when you meet them to help them understand your needs. Keep an identification card with you at all times. Keep the contact information of your significant others with you whenever you leave your home. Doing this can help others assist you should you need it.

Carry a pencil and paper with you at all times. This may help you to express an idea in writing if you can't say it aloud. You may also carry pictures, diagrams or drawings to show people what you want to say.

Many people with aphasia successfully communicate non-verbally. They can use hand gestures or point to objects.

There are also certain things that friends and family members of people with aphasia can do to help their loved one successfully communicate. The following section includes tips for communicating with a person with aphasia.



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Family members are encouraged to:

- Simplify language. Use short, uncomplicated sentences.
- Repeat keywords or write them down to clarify meaning as needed.
- Maintain a natural conversational manner appropriate for an adult.
- Minimize distractions, such as a loud radio or TV, whenever possible.



Family members should also:

- Include the person with aphasia in conversations.
- Ask for and value the opinion of the person with aphasia.
- Encourage any type of communication, whether it is speech, gesture, pointing or drawing.
- Avoid correcting the person's speech.

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Aphasia may affect a person's quality of life. It can cause problems because communication is so much a part of your life. Language barriers may lead to embarrassment, depression and relationship problems.

If you are affected by aphasia, there are certain things you can do to help improve your quality of life. There are also certain things that friends and family members of people with aphasia can do to help their loved one successfully communicate.

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