

May Your Health Matters

Adult Communication Difficulties:

Many kinds of Problems with as many Ways to Help

As adults, we may sometimes take for granted our normal speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, which are the four cornerstones of healthy communication. Whether it's listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, taking notes in class, texting a friend or chatting over coffee; these help us to live life to the fullest. The sudden or gradual loss of any of these skills can be a shock and a challenge for most people.

Communication disorders occur in adult life for many different reasons. Age related hearing loss is perhaps the most common of these. People with any type of hearing loss should see an Audiologist for assessment, diagnosis and treatment. Speech Language disorders make up the other major group of adult communication problems. A Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) provides the proper assessment, diagnosis and treatment of each. These problems, described in detail below, may be associated with stroke, brain tumor, traumatic brain injury and other conditions.

Dysarthria (*pronounced DIS-AR-THREE-AH*) is a group of speech disorders due to paralysis, weakness, or lack of coordination of the speech muscles. It occurs with cerebral palsy, as well as other diseases such as Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis and ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Apraxia (*pronounced A-PRAX-SIA*), is a speech programming disorder which makes words and sentences sound jumbled or meaningless. Apraxia may be present on its own or as part a mixed diagnosis together with aphasia. Articulation disorders caused by neurological damage such as stroke or head injury are labelled as motor speech disorders. The language disorder known as aphasia (*pronounced A-FAY-SHA*) is due to brain damage or disease that causes difficulty in expressing, and /or understanding language. Voice disorders include: inappropriate pitch, loudness, and quality (hoarseness) or total voice loss. These types of voice problems may result from damage to the vocal cords due to surgery, misuse of the voice, (overuse, yelling or singing) disease (cancer of the larynx), or other conditions (cleft palate, cerebral palsy or hearing impairment). A final category of communication difficulty for adults includes fluency disorders such as stuttering. These disorders include disruption in the normal flow of rhythm of speech. Characteristics may include any or all of the following: repetition of

sounds, words-or phrases, hesitations, taking longer than normal to make single sounds, and inserting more sounds/words/phrases than needed when talking. Stuttering behaviors can vary from person to person and often run in families.

Adults who feel the negative impact of any of the above often find speech language therapy helpful in maintaining or improving their communication skills and overall quality of life. There are a wide variety of therapy techniques that go well beyond traditional practice of working on better pronunciation of sounds. One example, in the area of aphasia treatment, includes Supported Conversation for Adults with Aphasia (SCA). This approach, developed at Ontario's Aphasia Institute, trains health care professionals to use extra supports such as pictures and gestures that help their clients, patients and long term care residents to communicate for themselves versus having others speak for them. The use of SCA helps adults with aphasia let others know that they are capable of making their own decisions and getting their point across in spite of having difficulty getting their words out. More importantly, use of SCA gives adults with aphasia a way of getting in on everyday conversations that help improve their socialization and overall quality of life. In the same way that a wheelchair ramp gives increased access to a building, use of SCA gives better access to conversations.

Research has shown that use of such good communication practices is linked to better health outcomes for adults. Other treatments for adults include training in the use of: self-monitoring of speaking volume for patients with Parkinson's Disease, an electro larynx by cancer patients who have had their voiceboxes removed and an iPad app to carry on conversations by patients who have lost their voice due to ALS. The latter are just a few examples of ways in which SLPs promote and improve the communication health of adults in our community.

Each year in May we recognize Speech and Hearing month as the time to be more aware and appreciative of our communication health. This month is a great time to celebrate our desire to speak well, hear well and live well. For more information on the adult speech language and swallowing services provided by Canadian Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists please refer to the national website SAC-OAC. To look up more information on the programs and services offered by Western Health, see www.westernhealth.nl.ca.

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