

HELPING COMMUNICATION AFTER A STROKE

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



This factsheet is aimed at carers and family members who support people with communication problems after a stroke.

A stroke can affect a person's ability to understand, speak, read or write.

About 1 in 3 people who have a stroke will have difficulty speaking and / or understanding what is being said. It can be frightening and frustrating for someone who

has suddenly lost their ability to communicate and this can have a significant impact on relationships and daily life. It is important to realise that difficulty in communicating is **not** the same as being confused and does not affect intelligence.

A stroke can affect communication in different ways. However, the main conditions that happen as a result of a stroke are aphasia and dysarthria:

- **Aphasia** affects the person's ability to use and understand spoken and written language. It can affect expression, understanding, reading and writing, including the ability to use numbers. It can also sometimes be referred to as dysphasia.
- **Dysarthria** is a weakness of the muscles that you use to speak. The person has no difficulty understanding what is being communicated but their speech may sound slurred, slow and unclear.

Everyone is affected differently by stroke and these conditions can also occur together.

Anyone who has communication difficulties after a stroke should receive a full assessment from a speech and language therapist (SLT). This is essential to identify how the person's communication has been affected and to find new and different ways to communicate.

An SLT will assess and identify therapy needs. These could range from supported conversation such as use of gestures, writing, pictures and facial expressions, to picture cards and boards, through to computer and electronic communication aids.



FACTSHEET

CHEST HEART & STROKE SCOTLAND

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Support from healthcare professionals, family members and carers is essential. The daily practice of skills and the encouragement of relatives and friends can make a big difference to the level of recovery. Recovery depends on the location and severity of a stroke. The rate and level of recovery is different for everyone.

What can I do to help communicate?

It is important to remember that **your** communication skills can make a difference. Conversation may be difficult for a time and your relationship may change in some ways but it is important to be positive. Try to adopt and appreciate other non-verbal methods of communication. Tips to help you communicate include:

- Give your full attention; minimise distractions and background noise.
- Position yourself where your face is clearly visible.
- Be patient and offer reassurance.
- Be aware that the person you are communicating with may have more difficulty on some days than others, especially if they are tired, upset or under pressure.
- Don't rush; give plenty of time.
- Try to establish a reliable way of communicating 'yes' and 'no' between you.
- Gestures can be more reliable than speech so use simple gestures such as thumbs up or down, pointing or miming.
- Speak slowly and clearly and at normal volume.
- Keep language clear and simple. Use short sentences and offer choices when asking questions.
- Writing and drawing can be helpful. Write down key words as you go through the conversation – use these to summarise the conversation and check your understanding is correct. Encourage the person to try and write too if possible as even a couple of letters may help them find the word they are searching for.
- Make use of communication aids such as conversation support books, charts and electronic devices, such as computers, laptops, tablets.
- Ask for repetition – especially if someone's speech is slurred or indistinct.
- Clearly indicate when you have understood – use facial expressions and intonation to support your speech when conveying meaning, understanding and encouragement.
- It is okay if the conversation gets stuck. It is fine to leave a topic and come back to it later. A good tip is to stop, pause and try again or come back to the subject at a later time or date.



What should I try not to do?

- If you are having difficulty understanding the person, don't pretend that you have. Be honest and explain that you have not been able to understand and go back to a point in the conversation where you were both clear.
- Don't speak for the person or presume that they can't respond / understand.
- It is important to keep your focus and maintain communication with the person you are communicating with. Don't ask other people for information that the person could provide.
- Try not to build unrealistic expectations, and accept all forms of communication. Be aware that sometimes unexpected forms of expression such as swearing or singing come out. This is involuntary and out of the person's control. Words may come out but they cannot be understood by other people, although they seem right to the person speaking them.

Where can I get more help?

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland offers a range of rehabilitation support services throughout Scotland.

For people with speech and language problems after a stroke and their carers the service can provide:

- One-to-one communication support, which is provided to an individual either in hospital, at home or in the community. A trained communication partner will support the individual to achieve their personal goals.
- Communication support groups, either in hospital or in the community, give people the chance to practice and improve their communication in a relaxed supportive environment.
- Health information resources including stroke booklets and factsheets. You may also find the two part aphasia-friendly publication 'Your Stroke Journey' a useful resource to read together.

For further information, support and advice,
please contact the CHSS Advice Line nurses.
Tel: 0808 801 0899 (9.30am–4pm, Mon–Fri)
Email: advice@chss.org.uk
Web: www.chss.org.uk

*The Advice Line nurses can also give you
information about how to contact a speech and
language therapist for specific individual advice.*



Other organisations:

The Tavistock Trust for Aphasia

Tel: 01525 290002 • Email: enquiries@aphasiatavistocktrust.org
Website: www.aphasiatavistocktrust.org

A charity that works to improve the quality of life for those with aphasia, their families and their carers.

Headway

Tel: 0808 800 2244 • Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Website: www.headway.org.uk

Headway is a UK-wide charity that works to improve life after brain injury.

**If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line Nurses**

0808 801 0899

Call FREE from landlines and mobiles