Many people with Parkinson’s will experience difficulties with speech at some stage. Speech disorders vary greatly from person to person with some people reporting speech issues early after a diagnosis of Parkinson’s while others report only mild difficulties across time.

This fact sheet discusses the main types of speech issues that can occur for people with Parkinson’s, along with treatment and strategies for improving communication. However, any speech issues that arise should be discussed with your Doctor, or Parkinson’s Field Officer, for referral to a Speech-Language Therapist.

**Voice Issues**
Voice issues are the most common speech difficulty for people with Parkinson’s. To produce speech, the vocal cords must vibrate to make sound. For people with Parkinson’s, the vocal cords may become rigid or bowed and, in some cases, exhibit tremor. This results in a breathy, hoarse, sometimes tremulous voice with low volume. Reduced volume is generally considered the most debilitating of these problems as it can make speech very difficult to understand. This can be particularly problematic in noisy environments such as in restaurants or outdoors.

**Speech Rate and Intonation**
Intonation is the rise and fall in pitch that occurs during speaking. It is commonly impaired in people with Parkinson’s and results in a monotone or flat sounding voice. This makes emotions such as happiness and excitement difficult to detect in the voice. A rapid rate of speech may also develop in some people with Parkinson’s. In this case, it is very difficult for people to slow down their speech.

**Articulation**
Articulation refers to the movements of the lips, tongue, and jaw to produce clear speech sounds. People with Parkinson’s may notice that their speech has become “imprecise” or “slurred”. Again, it is thought that rigidity and tremor of muscles of articulation cause these problems.

**Other**
Other speech difficulties include: a stuttering-like behaviour where the person will repeat syllables or phrases, slow speech, nasal-sounding speech, and difficulties getting speech started.

**What Help is Available?**
Overall, communication difficulties for people with Parkinson’s are reported as one of the most socially isolating aspects of the condition. Help is available in the form of either direct speech treatment or the use of strategies to improve communication.
For people experiencing speech issues, it is important to seek advice early from your Doctor or Parkinson’s Field Officer for a referral to a Speech-Language Therapist in your area. Treatment is usually available on a one-on-one basis with a Speech-Language Therapist. They will also provide advice and specific strategies to improve communication.

**Lee Silverman Voice Treatment (LSVT)**
For direct treatment of the speech problem, current research indicates that LSVT is optimal for most people with Parkinson’s disease. LSVT is an exercise programme for the voice. Treatment occurs one-on-one with a Speech-Language Therapist four times per week for four weeks—a total of 16 sessions. The sessions focus on increasing loudness of speech. Research has shown that LSVT results in increased loudness and improved speech intelligibility for people with Parkinson’s. A number of speech-language therapy departments at hospitals in New Zealand offer LSVT services.

**Strategies to Improve Communication**
A speech therapist will work with you to come up with a tailored strategy for your needs. Some general strategies which can assist follow below.

**For People with Parkinson’s**
- For important conversations, speak in a quiet environment without too many background distractions where possible. For example, turn the volume off on the TV or radio.
- Get your listener’s attention before you start speaking—a person needs to be paying attention for them to understand your speech.
- Be direct and use short sentences with predictable types of wording. For example, say “Close the window, please” instead of “I wouldn’t mind if you would close the window”.
- Don’t have important conversations when you are tired.

**For the Family and Friends of the Person with Parkinson’s**
- Make sure your hearing is as good as possible! Good hearing and properly fitted hearing aids make the speech of people with Parkinson’s easier to understand.
- Avoid talking between rooms at home.
- Give your undivided attention and watch closely as the person is speaking. Make sure if you can, that you can see the person’s face.
- Avoid important conversations when the person with Parkinson’s is tired.

Speech difficulties can have a major impact on the quality of life of people with Parkinson’s preventing them from taking part in family, social, and work activities or making participation onerous. It is important that speech difficulties are discussed with a health professional as soon as possible. There are many speech techniques and strategies that can make a real difference for people with Parkinson’s.

**References**