

Communication and Parkinson's

People with Parkinson's may have problems with speech and communication.

Many people with Parkinson's will experience difficulties with speech and communication¹. Communication difficulties can vary greatly from person to person. Any communication issues that arise should be discussed with your doctor or Parkinson's Community Educator.

We recommend you try to see a Speech-Language Therapist as early as you can after you've been diagnosed. Even if you aren't experiencing any specific problems, a speech language therapist can give you some useful information about possible problems that may arise, how to spot them and what can be done about them before they have any negative effects.

A Speech-Language Therapist may also spot any subtle changes that you may not be aware of. This will help you manage the symptom before it comes difficult.

VOICE AND SPEECH ISSUES

If you have Parkinson's, you may find you have some problems with your voice. For example, your voice may be hoarse or quieter than it used to be. These problems can make everyday activities, such as using the phone, maintaining a good volume during the day and communicating in noisy environments like cafes, difficult.

A monotonous or flat voice is usually noticed by friends and family. A monotone or flat sounding voice can make emotions such as happiness and excitement difficult to detect in the voice.

You may find that your speech has become "unclear" or "slurred". You may find it hard to control how quickly you speak or you may find it difficult to start talking. Following fast changing topics may be hard or you may find it difficult to get your thoughts together to follow a conversation.

Some types of communication problems that you or a caregiver may notice can include^{2,3,4}:

- Quiet voice volume
- Breathy, hoarse voice quality
- Monotone – flat sounding voice
- Difficulties starting talking
- Running out of breath when talking

- Rushed speech rate
- Imprecise articulation / slurred / unclear
- Lack of facial expression and small or no gestures
- Needing time to understand the speaker
- Losing train of thought during conversation
- Word finding difficulties due to changes in cognition
- Difficulties managing saliva in mouth – drooling
- Difficulties getting out of the house physically in order to socialise

ROLE OF THE SPEECH-LANGUAGE THERAPIST

In most areas, you will be able to get in touch with a Speech-Language Therapist through your DHB. Referrals to a speech language therapist can be made through your Parkinson's Community Educator, GP or Neurologist.

You might find it helpful to have regular check-ups. This allows the Speech-Language Therapist to monitor whether there are any changes with your speech or getting your message across. If there are, they can recommend specific exercises or programmes to help you. If your speech does become really difficult, speech language therapists have the expertise to support you or to advise on alternative ways of communicating using various communication aids.

Although the types of therapy available to you may depend on where you live, here is a list of the types of communication interventions available in New Zealand through your DHB (hospital, outpatient or home based), private practice or TalkLink:

- Individual speech-language therapy sessions focusing on any aspect of communication – voice, speech rate and intonation, articulation, language or non-verbal communication.
- Changes in cognition (thinking skills) can have an impact on communication. There are strategies that a speech language therapist, occupational therapist and psychologist can employ to assist these changes.
- In the later stages of Parkinson's, this may include equipment that will amplify voice or communication devices that can be used to express messages.

Parkinson's Choirs

Parkinson's Choirs are gaining popularity across New Zealand and choral singing has been shown to improve quality of life, loudness, voice strength and intonation in people with Parkinson's. Choral singing is available through your Parkinson's New Zealand branch or division, your local DHB, some University programmes and neurological or community choirs.

MEDICATION

For some people with Parkinson's, medication for their condition, such as levodopa, may help improve the volume and clarity of their speech. For many people, however, medication has no effect on everyday speech^{5,6} so it's important to get advice from a Speech Language Therapist on other ways of making your speech clearer.

TIPS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

Difficulties with communication can be upsetting and frustrating for a person with Parkinson's and for those around them. A Speech-Language Therapist will work with you to come up with an individual plan for you and your family. There are some basic things you can do to make life a little easier.

- Communicate in a quiet environment without too much background noise. 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.
- Avoid talking between rooms at home.
- Make sure you are using gestures and facial expressions when possible.
- Keep your volume up and your speech rate slow. Counting each word on your fingers may help you slow down your speech rate.

COMPUTERS AND APPS

Sometimes, instead of speaking, you may find it easier to use other methods of communication. For example, if you have access to a computer, using the internet and email can be a useful way to stay in touch. If you use a smartphone, there are many apps that are being developed to help with communication difficulties. For example, DAF Professional (iOS/Android) is an easy to use professional speech therapy app to help people with Parkinson's slow their rate of speech so it sounds clearer to others.

WHO CAN HELP?

Communication difficulties can have a major impact on the quality of life of people with Parkinson's. There are many communication techniques and strategies that can make a real difference for people with Parkinson's so make sure you get help.

- Your Parkinson's Community Educator
- Your GP or Neurologist
- Your local Speech-Language Therapist through your District Health Board
- A local private Speech-Language Therapist
- The University of Auckland, University of Canterbury and Massey University all have speech-language therapy programmes and may offer individual and group therapy in their student clinics throughout the year.

Revised Dr A Miles, PhD & P Friary, BSLT Hons

Acknowledging the original author Dr M McAuliffe, PhD

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Please do not interpret anything in this fact sheet as personal medical advice, always check any medical problem with your Doctor. Further information may be obtained from your Parkinson's Community Educator.

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Lee Silverman Voice Treatment (LSVT LOUD)

LSVT LOUD is an intensive four-week exercise programme for improving communication in people with Parkinson's with a focus on increasing loudness of speech. LSVT services are generally offered in private practice in New Zealand. In some areas LSVT may be available through your local DHB or a University programme.