

## **Swallowing Disorders in Older Adults**

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### **Terms**

- **Speech**
  - Is the mouth, tongue, and other parts working together to form words.
- **Language**
  - Includes both comprehension (what we understand from speech) and expression (speech, gestures, etc.)
- **Cognition**
  - Includes 'thinking skills,' which include attention, memory, and problem solving.

### **Common Causes of Communication Disorders in Older Adults**

- Cerebral Vascular Accident (Stroke)
  - A sudden interruption of blood flow in the brain either due to bleeds or blockages
- Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA)
  - Small stroke where symptoms may last briefly and usually resolve within 24 hours
- Strokes are the leading cause of disability among adults.
  - Risk factors include (American Heart Assoc., 2005):
    - Age 55 or older
    - Male
    - African-American
    - Diabetes
    - Hypertension
    - Smoking
    - Family history of stroke
    - TIA
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
  - A TBI is an injury to the brain caused by an external force which may change consciousness.
  - Falls are the leading cause of TBI among persons ages over the age of 65.
  - A TBI is a consequence of a head injury.
- Alzheimer's Disease (AD)
  - AD is a chronic, progressive deterioration of intellect, memory, cognition, and communicative function resulting from brain disease.
  - Behavioral and personality changes occur with the disease.

- The cause is still unknown, and there is no cure.
- Occurrence of the disease increase with advancing age.
- AD is a type of dementia.
- Parkinson's Disease
  - Parkinson's is a disorder that affects the nervous system. It is caused by a loss of a chemical in the brain called dopamine.
  - It is a movement disorder that can interfere with speaking.
  - Persons affected by Parkinson's may develop dementia.
  - A condition called Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus is sometimes mistaken for Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.
- Other Causes

### **Communication Disorders in Older Adults**

- Aphasia
  - Aphasia is the impairment of language, which affects comprehension and/or expression
  - Types of aphasia are fluent, nonfluent, global.
- Dysarthria
  - Dysarthria produces problems due to weakness, paralysis, and incoordination of the muscles used for speech.
  - What might we see or hear
- Apraxia of Speech
  - Apraxia is a speech disorder in which there is a problem in the sequencing of the movements required for speech.
  - It is not from weakness or paralysis of the muscles.
- Dementia and Other Cognitive Problems
  - Short-term memory loss
  - Problem-solving difficulties

### **What Can Affect a Person's Recovery of Their Communication Skills?**

- Severity of brain damage & medical diagnosis
- Age
- Motivation
- Family Support
- Previous level of independence
- Pain or other medical problems
- Variability in performance

## **Role of a Speech-Language Pathologist**

- Evaluate speech, language, and cognitive functioning to:
  - Determine type of communication impairments
  - Determine severity of these impairments
  - Develop an appropriate treatment plan
- Enhance communication for the client through therapy in a variety of ways
- Communication Enhancement
  - Have the communication partners simplify their speech
  - Find out which kind of cues work for the person
    - If they have problems listening, can you add written materials to help out?
    - If they cannot speak, can they write it out or talk around the word to describe it?
- Enhance Communication
  - Use of other means to communicate in order to support or supplement speech
  - Examples:
    - Writing
    - Pointing to a letter board
    - Pointing to a picture board
    - Using an electronic communication device
    - Using a computer-assisted device
- Communication Devices
  - Benefits of using them
  - Challenges in using them
- If a patient has Dysarthria:
  - Improve production of speech sounds.
  - Improve inflection pattern.
  - Improve how voice sounds.
  - Improve breath support.
- If a patient has Apraxia:
  - Try to improve sequencing needed for speech.
- If a patient has cognitive impairments, use memory & organizational strategies:
  - Develop a routine and stay with it.
  - Create a place for everything and store everything in its place.
  - Use a tote bag or backpack. Plan ahead and place things in the bag needed for each day.
  - Use a to-do list.

- Use a day planner or calendar to keep track of important appointments and activities.
- Teach the person and the family strategies to improve communication
- Advocate for special services needed

### **Strategies to Enhance Communication**

- Address any hearing loss or vision changes.
- Background noises should be at a minimum.
- Make sure the person has your attention.
- If understanding speech is difficult, speak in short concrete sentences or about familiar topics.
- Write down key words of your conversation.
- If memory is a problem, ask questions that have choices for the answer.
- Ask person to repeat, rephrase, or write what s/he said.

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