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Speech, talking and understanding after ABI

This section will tell you about the sort of problems you may have with speech after your brain injury:

- **What are the main problems I will have with speech?**
- **Talking**
- **Listening**
- **Talking with your friends**
- **Other ways we communicate**
- **Writing**
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What are the main problems I will have with speech?

Speech is really clever because it helps us to communicate exactly what we want to say to other people and it also helps us to learn new things.

Speech is very complicated, There are lots of things that go on inside the body that enables us to speak. If you have hurt your 'speech centre' in the brain, which is located in the frontal and temporal lobe, you can have lots of different problems speaking. Problems include:

- **Talking:** You can find it hard to speak.
- **Listening:** Sometimes you can't understand what is being said
- **Trying to write.**

Talking

When we want to say something, we figure out what we want to say and as we breathe out the vocal cords (called the 'larynx') move and as the air passes through them and then moves over our tongue, we form words and speak.

When we talk our brain has a lot of work to do. Imagine talking to your friend. You first have to listen to them, the brain figures out what they have said, and then figures out an answer. The brain then tells your lungs to breathe out, you vocal cords and tongue to move, and then say what you want to.





If the temporal lobe or frontal lobe has been damaged, you can find it difficult to speak. This might be because the brain has forgotten how to speak, or the message from the brain is having difficulty getting through to the parts of the body that allow you speak, like the tongue.

Here are some problems you may have:

- **Dysphasia (also called aphasia):** This can affect both the understanding and production of spoken and written words. It doesn't affect your intelligence but it can mean that the damaged brain can't figure out what has been said to you or that you have difficulty getting words back out.
- **Dysarthria:** This is a condition that affects speech production. This is when the things that control our voice like lips, tongue and other muscles aren't getting messages from the brain. Your tongue is a muscle and if it is not been told what to say by the brain, you can't speak. Most of the time, not all of your speech muscles are affected, so you can speak but it might sound slurred and be hard to understand.
- **Dyspraxia:** This is caused by problems controlling your muscles that produce speech in the way you used to do. When you speak, different muscles move in order to produce the sound and words. If you can't do this you find it hard to speak.
- **Talking quietly:** This can be a problem if you spent a long time on a ventilator (sometimes known as a life support machine) in intensive care. When we talk, the lungs push air through our vocal cords (called the larynx). Being on a ventilator for a long time can damage the lungs and make them weak. This can make it hard to push air through our vocal cords and can make us talk really quietly. This won't affect everyone.
- **Small changes:** You may find that you can speak just fine and that there are only a few small problems. These include: saying words wrong occasionally, getting your words mixed up, or not being able to 'find your words' or 'remember words'. You might talk too fast or too slowly. It may take you longer to say what you want and take you a while to get to the point of what you want to say.

After hurting your head you may have to spend some time remembering words that you know. This can be frustrating because you can't say things as well as you would like to.

This can be more frustrating when you try and learn new words. As we get older, we learn more words and the sort of words we learn become more sophisticated and complicated. Words can be big or small and have more than one meaning.

When you start secondary school, it is quite common to start to learn foreign languages like French, Spanish or German. This is very hard





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for anyone with an ABI as they are still trying to re-learn their own language.

It may be unrealistic to think you will be able to learn a foreign language. This can be upsetting but it is better to be honest about what you can and cannot do when you get back to school. Talk to the teaching staff about what they think is possible for you.

Listening

This can be affected for lots of reasons but hurting your temporal lobe is a common reason. Listening becomes really hard especially if you have a headache and feel stressed.

Sometimes, it can take you a long time to figure out what has just been said to you. This can be hard if a teacher asks you a question. It may take a long time to figure out what the teacher was asking about and what the answer is. Sometimes you can spend so long trying to figure out what has been said to you, you miss the next part of the conversation. This can be very frustrating as people may assume you don't know the answer when you do, but you just can't say it quickly enough. Make sure that your problems with understanding and responding to questions are understood by your teachers. You can get a parent to explain it to them or print off this sheet and show it to them.

You might find it easier to have short conversations with 'yes' and 'no' answers. When people talk to you for a long time about complicated stuff you may find it hard to listen and switch off.

Talking with your friends

Talking with your friends can be really hard too. Maybe your friends don't really understand what has happened to you. Perhaps they find it hard to understand why you have changed. Talking with your friends might be very different from what you remember for lots of reasons.

Maybe you don't 'get jokes' anymore. Sometimes, it can be hard to understand jokes or when someone is being funny because humour can be used where people say the opposite of what they mean. This can be very confusing. If they are sarcastic as well, you won't get the joke because they use a confusing tone.

Children and young people often say things to each other that only they can understand. This is why a lot of the time adults don't





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understand the words that kids use. It can be very embarrassing when adults try to use these words to look 'cool'.

After hurting your head, you may find that a lot of the words that your friends use don't make any sense to you anymore. This can be very upsetting and maybe your friends find it hard to speak to you because you don't understand. Sometimes other children might start poking fun at you because you don't understand.

If you have problems with disinhibition, maybe you use rude words or say things that upset other people. This is because you find it hard not to say what you really think. This can be tricky but over time, and with help from your friends and support worker (if you have one), this might get better.

Other ways we communicate

We don't just communicate through talking to each other. We also use something called 'non-verbal communication'. That means all of those things that we see when we look at someone. If you saw someone crying, you'd know they were upset. Sometimes you can tell someone is 'happy' and you don't even have to speak to them. After hurting your head, it can sometimes be very hard to understand what the non-verbal communication means.

Writing

Writing is how we put our thoughts onto paper. Not everyone finds it easy to read or write, but after hurting your head it can be hard to write anything, even if you were good at writing before. If you could not read or write before hurting your head, it is very difficult to learn to read and write at all. Some people maybe able to speak OK, they just can't write it down.

Writing is a very clever skill. We first have to think about what we want to write down, how to spell it, and what the sentence is that we want to write. The brain then has to tell the hand to hold the pen and make small movements so that we can write the letters.

If you have hurt the frontal lobe, you will find holding the pen hard. If you have hurt the occipital lobe, you may find looking at words hard and will not be able to see what you are writing.





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What can be done to help?

Not being able to talk, understand people, or write things down can be very upsetting. Try to remember that you are not alone and that lots of people have this problem when they hurt their head.

You will never be expected to just go to school without some help. You will have a period of 'transition' where lots of people will help you to try and improve the things you are having problems with.

Here are some people that may help you:

Physiotherapist: If you are having problems projecting your voice, the physiotherapist might give you exercises to help the lungs get strong. Your voice might improve then.

Speech therapist: A Speech therapist knows all about how we speak. They can help with voice training and they can train you how to speak again if you are having lots of problems.

Classroom assistant: When you go back to school, you may have a classroom assistant who can help you with your schoolwork. They should allow you to go slowly so that you don't try and do too much.

School teachers: Some school teachers know what hurting your head can be like. They can be really useful to talk to. If you are having problems talking, maybe ask someone from home to talk to them for you and to tell them things they can do to help you in class.

Educational psychologists: Seeing an educational psychologist can help with the problems of going back to school. They know lots of things about how you learn. An educational psychologist can think of ways to help you at school and make sure that you are getting the support you need.

