Voice & speech changes

Dysarthria is a medical word for changes in speech caused by weak or slow-moving muscles in the face, mouth, and throat.

If people often ask you to repeat yourself or say your voice sounds soft or unclear, it might be time to talk to a speech pathologist.

Changes in voice

Dysarthria is a medical term for changes in speech caused by weak or slow-moving muscles in the face, mouth, and throat. For people with Parkinson's, this is very common, with up to 90% of people noticing changes in how they speak

How Parkinson's affects your speech

Parkinson's slows down your movements and reduces the strength and range of movements, and that includes in the muscles you use to talk. This can lead to:

- A soft or quiet voice
- Mumbling or slurred words
- Flat tone (monotone)
- Breathy or hoarse voice
- Fast or stuttering speech
- Trouble with word-finding
- Fewer facial expressions, making it harder to show emotion.

These changes can make it harder to join conversations, talk on the phone, or feel confident in social settings.

In fact, speech changes can begin early in the condition, even before other symptoms are noticed. Changes to speech can have a significant impact on quality of life.

What can help?

The good news is that speech pathology can make a big difference. A speech pathologist can:

- Check how your voice and speech are working
- Teach you exercises to strengthen your voice
- Help you speak more clearly and confidently
- Suggest tools like voice amplifiers or communication apps if needed
- Work with your family or carers so they can support you.

There are also special evidence-based programs like LSVT LOUD and SPEAK OUT!, which are designed just for people with Parkinson's. These programs focus on increasing vocal effort, which helps improve loudness and clarity. It has been found that these programs can also improve swallowing.

Tips for Better Communication

- Sit or stand tall when you speak
- Take a deep breath before talking
- 'Think loud' and 'speak loud'
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Pause often to give yourself time to take more breaths
- Reduce background noise and distractions
- Look at the person you're talking to
- Practise daily because just like physical exercise, your voice needs a workout too
- Try singing or reading out loud to keep your voice strong.

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Why early help matters

Getting help early can make a big difference. Studies show that early speech pathology can help slow down the decline in speech and improve quality of life.

If you notice any of these signs, it's a good idea to see a speech pathologist:

- People say they can't hear or understand you
- You avoid talking in groups or noisy places
- You feel frustrated or left out of conversations
- You find it hard to talk on the phone.

You can find a speech pathologist through your GP or by using the search function on the Speech Pathology Australia website 'Find a Speech Pathologist'.

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ParkinsonNet speech & language therapy guidelines www.parkinsonnet.com/guidelines

Infosheet kindly reviewed by Speech Pathology Australia.

To find a speech pathologist go to: www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

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