

## What is aphasia?



*You were probably confronted with aphasia for the first time a while back. In the beginning aphasia raises questions, such as: what is aphasia, how does it develop, and which additional problems could occur?*

### **What is aphasia?**

Every human being uses language. Talking, finding the right words, understanding, reading, writing, and making gestures are part of our language use. If as a result of brain damage one or more parts of language use stop functioning properly, this is called aphasia.

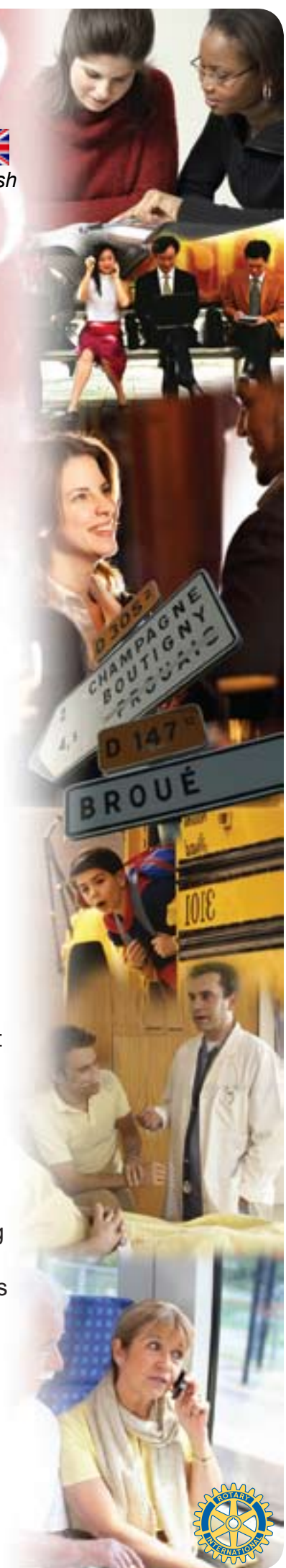
Aphasia - A (=non) phasia (=speaking) means therefore that someone can no longer say what he or she wants. He or she cannot use language anymore. Apart from aphasia, paralyses could occur and/or problems with regard to:


- conscious acting,
- observing the surroundings,
- concentrating, taking initiatives, and the memory.

People cannot do two things at the same time anymore.

Many people experience the frustration during their holiday abroad of not being able to clearly state what they mean, or of not properly understanding what the other person says. Even in countries of which we master the language well, we can experience this for example when visiting a doctor. In countries of which we master the language less well, our communication capacities with the local population always become more limited, and we even don't succeed all the time to order the dish we would really like to eat. People who suffer from aphasia experience these problems every day. Aphasia is therefore a language disorder. There are not two people who suffer from aphasia that are equal: aphasia is different for everyone. The severity and scope of the aphasia depend, among other things, on the location and the severity of the brain damage, the earlier linguistic competence, and someone's personality. Some people with aphasia can understand language well, but have trouble finding the right words or constructing sentences. Others on the other hand do speak a lot, but what they say is not or difficult to understand for their conversation partner; these people often have great trouble understanding the language. The linguistic competence of most people with aphasia is somewhere between these two extremes. Do notice: someone who suffers from aphasia in general has his or her complete intellectual capacities at his or her disposal!

Almost always there is some spontaneous recovery of the language when aphasia develops. This recovery is seldom or never complete. Still, with a lot of exercises, effort and perseverance, some improvement can be made.





## Development of aphasia

Aphasia develops as a result of brain damage. The origin of such brain damage is mostly a blood vessel disorder. Such a disorder is also called a stroke, cerebral haemorrhage, cerebral infarction or apoplexy. In medical terms it is called a CVA: Cerebral (=brains) Vascular (=blood vessel) Accident. Other causes for the development of aphasia are for example a trauma (an injury to the brains as a result of for example a (road) accident or a brain tumour).

Our brains need oxygen and glucose in order to function. If as a result of a CVA or one of the other causes the blood circulation in the brains is disrupted, brain cells die off on that location. In the brains there are all sorts of areas with different functions. For most people the areas for the use of language are located in the left half of the brains. In case of injury in these language areas we speak of aphasia.

## Which additional problems could occur?

It seldom happens that someone only suffers from aphasia. Often other areas of the brain are affected as well. Examples of additional problems are:

- hemiplegic condition (hemi=half, plegic=paralysis). For people suffering from aphasia this is often the right part of the body. The conduct of the muscles on one side of the body is affected, as a result of which the muscles don't collaborate well anymore.
- loss of half of the eyesight (hemianopsia, hemi=half, opsia=to see). Mostly people do see everything that is located at the side of their healthy body half, but not the things that are located on their affected side.
- not knowing anymore how certain actions have to be performed (apraxia, a=not, praxia=perform). Simple actions such as getting dressed, eating, and drinking can suddenly not be carried out consciously anymore. Someone who suffers from apraxia does, for example, not know how to blow out a candle if he or she is asked to do so (conscious action), whereas he does automatically blow out the match he or she is holding if he or she is in danger of burning his or her fingers.
- problems with eating, drinking, and swallowing (dysphagia, dys=not well, phagia=swallowing). Because of the brain damage the digastric and swallow muscles can become paralysed, very sensitive, or even insensitive. This makes eating and drinking a difficult task. Because of the paralysis and loss of feeling in a part of the cheek, saliva can drip from the corner of the mouth unnoticed.
- memory problems. When remembering information language plays a large role. Because of the language problems the memory seems to function less well. Therefore always note down a couple of key words; this makes it easier for someone suffering from aphasia to remember things.
- react differently. Sometimes people react completely differently to events after suffering a stroke than they did before. The control of expressing emotions has become more difficult. It is possible that someone laughs and cries more often. It is also possible that it costs him or her more effort to stop doing so.
- epilepsy. When the brains recover from an injury scar tissue is

created in the brains. Sometimes this scar tissue causes a short circuit, so to speak, inside the brains. As a result of that the body convulses, someone often has problems breathing, and he or she can lose consciousness. Such an epileptic fit only lasts a few minutes, but often comes unexpectedly and the fright for the person who suffers from it as well as the family is therefore often huge.

The above list with additional problems is by no means complete. The aphasia symptoms and additional consequences are different for every human being. Each abovementioned problem *can* occur in combination with aphasia, but does not *have to*.

### **Treatment of aphasia**

Many people who suffer from aphasia have been hospitalised for some time. That hospitalisation often took place after the brain damage occurred. After being dismissed from the hospital many people with aphasia still need further treatment. It is not always clear who they can turn to for help. Please consult with the doctor who treats you on the possibilities in your area. The treatment of aphasia is almost always given by speech therapists. In principle anyone suffering from aphasia is eligible for speech therapy. The duration of the treatment is, among other things, connected with the recovery from the aphasia, and with the possibilities and regulations in the country you live in.


### **Guidelines for communication**

Because of aphasia the way in which someone understands something or expresses himself or herself changes. By making the best possible use of the remaining communication options people can still communicate with someone who suffers from aphasia. Someone with severe aphasia often only understands the most important words from a sentence. He or she understands the 'key words'. To understand things by means of key words can cause misunderstandings, since because of the combination of key words and the general knowledge of things, the message can be misunderstood. Sometimes we and someone who suffers from aphasia think we have understood each other well. A later reaction then sometimes shows that this was not the case.

### **If you would to like tell something to someone with aphasia**

- First of all, take your time for the conversation. Sit down comfortably and make eye contact.
- If you are dreading to have the conversation, then tell something simple about yourself and subsequently ask questions to which you yourself already know the answer.
- Speak slowly and in short sentences, and stress the most important words from a sentence.
- Write down the most important words. Repeat the message and give the aphasia patient what you wrote down. The aphasia patient can use it as a reminder or as a means of communication.



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- Help someone who suffers from aphasia with his or her problems when expressing himself or herself, by pointing, gesturing, drawing, or writing, and to ask whether he or she can point out, gesture, draw, or write something of it. Search together in the pocket dictionary or conversation book.

### **If someone with aphasia wants to tell you something**

First it has to be clear who is concerned, what happens or has happened, and possibly where or when the event takes place or took place. It is very important that you ask the right questions, are inventive, and proceed as systematically as possible. Always try to ask multiple choice questions, where you list the issues between which can be chosen next to each other.

### **Communication aids**

In many countries there are special picture-pointing books with words and drawings. By pointing at words or drawings one can make clear what one means. Consult your doctor or speech therapist on whether such aids are also available in your country. If that is not the case, you can make a communication book yourself. In it you can include pictures or images and words that are important for the person suffering from aphasia. In this way a discussion on events can take place and feelings can be discussed.

When communicating with someone suffering from aphasia, by means of such a picture-pointing book you can try and look together for concepts that are important for the discussion. See to it that you have pen and paper at hand. You can then write down the most important words from the conversation below each other, so that it becomes easier to follow and remember the contents of the conversation.

### **Patience conquers all**

Having a discussion with someone who suffers from aphasia requires a lot of time and patience. Despite the aforementioned tips it can happen that you still don't really understand each other. Let the subject rest for a while, and try again later; you will probably be more successful then!

### **More information**

On the website of the Association Internationale Aphasie (AIA) you can find more information on aphasia in various languages: [www.aphasia-international.com](http://www.aphasia-international.com). Here you will also find links to national aphasia associations that each provides information on aphasia in their own language.

The objective of this website is to bring aphasia to the attention, and to stimulate the foundation of contact groups for fellow-sufferers, in order to prevent people suffering from aphasia ending up in social isolation.