

Understanding Aphasia

This week, the family of actor Bruce Willis announced that he has been diagnosed with aphasia. A social media post by Willis' family says the aphasia is "impacting his cognitive abilities." This stunning announcement has many people wondering: what exactly is aphasia, and how serious is it?

"Aphasia is basically being unable to communicate, to talk. There is a center in our brain that thinks and there is another center in our brain that speaks out the words. Your mouth and your muscles are controlled by these brain centers. That is what aphasia is – being unable to communicate what you are thinking," says Dr. Shitaldas Pamnani, an internal medicine physician with OSF HealthCare.

Dr. Pamnani says that most of the time, people are able to recognize that their loved one is struggling with their words which prompts them to make an appointment with their doctor for evaluation.

"You will see a patient or a family member and you will realize that the speech pattern has changed. They are not making sense. Usually we see it in elderly people. Family members are usually able to pick it up that there is something wrong with the speech of the person," Dr. Pamnani says.

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), other signs of aphasia may include not understanding what others are saying, having trouble understanding jokes, struggling to read forms or books, or having a difficult time with math and telling time.

While aphasia is most often caused by a stroke, it also can be caused by brain tumors, traumatic brain injury, brain disorders, infections of the brain, and diseases in elderly people such as dementia and Parkinson's also can cause aphasia. Essentially, many types of brain damage can cause aphasia, according to Dr. Pamnani.

So, how serious is it?

"The seriousness depends on what actually caused the aphasia. Aphasia is a symptom. What caused or triggered it determines the severity as well as the grade of the aphasia. For example, some people with Broca's aphasia can express few words and few sentences but if it is a complicated sentence, they cannot express it. On the other hand, there are some people who cannot speak anything. They feel fearful because the words are not coming out of their mouth. So it depends on what caused it and the grade," explains Dr. Pamnani

Most people with aphasia are seen by a speech-language pathologist and use a variety of speech therapy tools to help regain their speech. If the cause is a brain tumor, removing the tumor typically helps reduce or eliminate the aphasia. In severe cases, additional tools and practices may be used.

Finding something you or your loved one enjoys and implementing that into the therapy can be very beneficial, says Dr. Pamnani. For example, if the person struggling with aphasia is a musician or enjoys music, incorporate music into their daily routine. There also are aphasia [support groups](#) available all across the country.

Dr. Pamnani adds that patience is key for both the patient and their loved ones.

"One thing for family members – and I have seen it in my stroke patients as well – is it's very frustrating. Just think of yourself – day to day you use your speech to communicate a variety of things and if you cannot express yourself, how frustrating that would be for you. So, be patient with them. Give them time," Dr. Pamnani advises.

If you or a loved one has been struggling with your speech, make an appointment with your primary care provider for an evaluation.

If you experience a sudden change in speech combined with other [symptoms](#) of a stroke (i.e. face drooping or arm weakness), call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.