

COVID-19 and Communication Challenges

People with, and recovering from, COVID-19 can experience a variety of communication challenges. Every day, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are working to make communication possible for these individuals.



What Challenges Look Like: COVID-19 survivors, particularly those in critical care, may need help communicating. Often, this is the result of being placed on a ventilator—which requires a tube to be inserted into, and eventually removed from, a patient’s throat. During the insertion or removal of the tube, a person’s vocal cords can be injured, making the person’s voice weak or hoarse.

For other COVID-19 survivors, virus complications—including stroke due to blood clotting—may produce communication problems. A stroke survivor can have difficulty understanding or producing language (called *aphasia*), slurred speech due to weak muscles (called *dysarthria*), and difficulty in programming muscles for speech (called *apraxia*).

Although limited communication abilities may be temporary for some patients, others continue to have problems after they’ve been discharged from the hospital.

Why Communication Is Critical: All people deserve to be able to communicate their wants and needs, such as being hungry, needing to go to the bathroom, or alleviating pain or discomfort. Communicating these messages is something most of us take for granted—until we can no longer do it.

In the pandemic environment, a person’s ability to communicate is especially critical, as family members who typically are able to speak on behalf of their loved ones are often restricted from being at their bedsides. Having the ability to communicate also reduces a patient’s risk of experiencing an adverse event in the hospital.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also extremely isolating. Here, too, having the ability to communicate with loved ones over video chat and telephone can improve mental health and enable recovery.

How SLPs Help: For those with significant speech and/or language challenges, SLPs can help patients find alternative ways to communicate. This is referred to as *augmentative and alternative communication*, and it includes methods such as writing, gesturing, pointing to written words or pictures, and using speech-generating devices.

This may be necessary for many reasons; for instance, when someone is using a ventilator, they are unable to communicate verbally. SLPs also provide a variety of other therapies based on a person’s individual speech or language challenges.

Where to Find Help: SLPs work in settings that include hospitals, long- and short-term care facilities, private practices, and patients’ homes. Many SLPs are also providing their services via telehealth at this time. If you or a loved one are experiencing communication challenges, let your doctor know. They should be able to recommend an SLP.

You can also find a searchable database of SLPs at www.asha.org/profind. Check to see if your insurance covers COVID-related rehabilitative services for communication.