



SEVERE SPEECH DISABILITIES AND SPEECH COMMUNICATION DEVICES

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Approximately eight in every 1,000 people are unable to use speech as their primary means of communication because of a severe speech disability caused by a variety of congenital and acquired conditions. In the U.S., this translates to more than 2 million people that could use a speech device; however, fewer than 5% of people that could benefit from a speech device have one. In reality, most people don't know communication devices exist or that funding is available to help pay for them.

In communicating with others, people with severe speech and language problems rely on many of the same standard techniques as people without speech disabilities, such as facial expressions and gestures, writing and drawing. In addition, they rely heavily on augmentative techniques and devices developed specifically to help them communicate.

The good news is that today's speech communication tools can be used to break the communication barriers these people confront so they can make meaningful connections with their worlds, improve the quality of their lives and regain self-sufficiency as they reduce caregiver burden. These tools include software and hardware technologies that can be easily used by people of all ages, cognitive levels, and physical abilities.

PREVALENCE, INCIDENCE AND DIAGNOSIS OF SEVERE SPEECH DISABILITIES

How many people are affected by severe speech disabilities?

Approximately eight in 1,000 people are unable to use speech as their primary means of communication. In the US and Canada, this translates to more than 2.6 million residents.

What are the causes of severe speech disabilities?

Severe speech disabilities are caused by stroke, traumatic brain injury, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, laryngectomy, developmental disabilities (such as autism and mental retardation) as well as such neurological disorders as Parkinson's Disease and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease).

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ABOUT AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION AND AVAILABLE TECHNOLOGIES

What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)?

Augmentative and alternative communication refers to ways other than speech that are used to relay a message from one person to another. These range from a simple communication board or book used to convey basic messages by pointing to high-tech speech-output devices that are limited only by an individual's abilities or imagination. Speech communication devices may include keyboards, symbols, and/or story boards that may be personalized and adapted to the user's lifestyle, preferences and daily activities.

What solutions are available for people with severe speech and language problems?

A range of techniques and technologies are available to aid people with severe speech and language difficulties. Methods include sign language, special gestures, Morse code, charts, language boards and electronic speech communication devices that can speak in response to entries on a keyboard or other methods of input, such as the push of a button, blink of an eye, wrinkle of an eyebrow or a puff of air.

How is an electronic communication device selected for a person with severe speech and language problems?

The selection of a communication device for a person with severe speech and language problems requires an evaluation by specialists who determine the needs and abilities of the individual. This includes an assessment of how the device will be used; for example, a larger unit for in-home or wheelchair-mount use; a smaller unit for people who are mobile. The team of people responsible for this process should include the individual with the communication disability, their family and a speech-language pathologist (SLP). This team also may include an occupational therapist, physical therapist, physician, rehabilitation engineer, educator, social worker, psychologist and/or vocational counselor, audiologist, orthotist, and the manufacturer/ distributor of the communication device (for product demonstration purposes).

What work is involved in learning a new communication method?

After the most suitable communication device is selected, the user and his caregivers must learn to use this speech device with the assistance of a professional. Functional augmented communication might never develop without effort from the augmented communicator, the user's family, friends, teachers or colleagues, and other professional members of the team. However, with just a little instruction, most people with speech disabilities easily master their speech communication device.

Do all people with severe speech disabilities use speech communication devices?

No. In fact, less than five percent of people who could benefit from this technology actually receive it because most people are unaware that the technology is available or whether their insurance carrier covers the cost.

How do people who need this technology pay for it?

Speech communication devices are generally purchased with funds from Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance carriers. The Department of Veterans Affairs and schools also pay for speech communication solutions. For more information, please refer to the document titled *Funding for Speech Communication Devices*.