



# SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY FACT SHEET

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers comprehensive speech-language pathology services to Veterans and Servicemembers. VA speech-language pathologists are professionals dedicated to providing high quality, comprehensive, caring and timely services to individuals who have a wide range of communication and swallowing disorders. Speech-language pathology services include the early identification or screening, evaluation, and treatment for speech, swallowing, language, voice and cognitive- communication disorders. Services are provided based on applying the best available research evidence, using expert clinical judgment and considering the patient’s individual preferences and values.

## CLINICAL ACTIVITIES

Speech-language pathologists are involved in the screening, evaluation and treatment of a broad range of communication and swallowing disorders, including:

**Speech Disorders:** When a person is unable to produce speech sounds precisely or fluently then he or she may have a speech disorder. Difficulty pronouncing sounds, or articulation disorders, and stuttering are examples of speech disorders. Speech-language pathologists also offer services for accent modification. A regional or foreign accent may impact the way an individual is understood at school or work and may benefit from treatment.

**Language Disorders:** Difficulty understanding the spoken language and verbal expression is often due to brain injury such as a stroke or traumatic brain injury. Aphasia is a language disorder frequently seen after trauma to the left hemisphere of the brain and includes difficulty in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and gesturing, but does not affect intelligence.

**Cognitive Disorders:** Cognitive problems include difficulty with attention, memory, orientation, organization, and problem-solving. A speech-language pathologist will work with the patient and their family to improve cognitive skills or to develop compensatory strategies designed to improve ability to function at home, school, and work.

**Voice Disorders:** Speech-language pathologists provide evaluation and treatment for disorders of voice including pitch, loudness, and nasal resonance. Speech-language pathologists also assist transgender and intersex Veterans and Servicemembers to modify aspects of voice and communication in a manner consistent with their identified gender.



**Swallowing Problems (Dysphagia):** Speech-language pathologists specialize in swallowing disorders or dysphagia and evaluate individuals who are experiencing problems with eating and drinking. Dysphagia may co-exist with a wide variety of neurological or structural problems and treatment may include modification of food or liquids, positioning while eating, or exercises to improve swallow function.

**Assistive Technology:** Speech-language pathologists are specialists in providing recommendations for a wide range of technology for individuals that are unable to speak or may need compensatory strategies to assist with memory or organization. Examples of assistive technology include a picture board paired with a laser pointer, utilization of applications (apps) for smart phones for a tablet, or a device that produces computerized speech accessed by an eye gaze switch.





**MEDICAL CONDITIONS OR PATIENT POPULATIONS**

Speech-language pathologists serve Veterans and Servicemembers of all ages with speech, language, and swallowing disorders that can result as a result many medical problems, including:

- Brain injury including a stroke or trauma to the head
- Progressive neurological disorders such as Parkinson’s Disease, Multiple Sclerosis, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), Huntington’s Disease, muscular dystrophy and dementia or Alzheimer’s disease
- Injury or surgery to the head and neck
- Oral and laryngeal cancer
- Laryngeal abnormalities such as vocal cord paresis or paralysis
- Spinal cord injury and dysfunction
- Respiratory compromise including tracheostomy and ventilator dependence

**CLINICAL ENCOUNTERS**

VA employs over 400 speech-language pathologists and offers services to over 158 sites of care throughout the VA Health Care System. VA Speech-Language Pathology had over 356,000 patient encounters in Fiscal Year 2014.

**TREATMENT SETTINGS**

Speech-language pathologists often work as members of specialized interdisciplinary teams to provide coordinated, comprehensive care to Veterans and Servicemembers.

Speech-language pathology personnel provide services in outpatient clinics and inpatient settings (including medical centers and community living centers) and in their homes.



Telehealth is also available as a treatment modality to provide specialized treatment in settings closer to the individual’s home. This may involve telehealth services to VA outpatient clinics or the home.



**HELPFUL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES INCLUDE:**

- ✓ Get the person’s attention before you start speaking.
- ✓ Maintain eye contact and pay attention to the speaker while watching the person’s body language and use of gestures.
- ✓ Reduce distractions and minimize or eliminate background noise (T.V., radio)
- ✓ Keep your voice at a normal level. Do not speak loudly unless the person asks you to do so.
- ✓ Introduce the topic with a single word or short phrase before speaking in sentences.
- ✓ Give the individual time to speak. Resist the urge to finish sentences or offer words.
- ✓ If the person has trouble speaking, encourage communication with drawings, gestures, writing and facial expressions in addition to speech.
- ✓ If the person has difficulty understanding, check with the listener to make sure they understand you, simplify your sentences, or ask simple “yes” or “no” questions.
- ✓ Use calendars, clocks, and notepads to remind the person of important information.
- ✓ Encourage normal activities and independence to avoid overprotection.

For more information, visit [www.rehab.va.gov](http://www.rehab.va.gov)  
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Additional Resource: American Speech Language Hearing Association, [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

