Communication difficulties after a stroke

What is communication?
Communication is the exchange of information, ideas or feelings. It involves:

Talking
Listening and concentrating
Understanding what is heard or read

Writing
Facial expression and body language
Tone of voice

What can go wrong?
Following a stroke, the area of the brain responsible for communication may be affected.

The result may be very mild communication problems, or severe difficulties. This depends on the extent of the stroke.

No two people will be affected in the same way, or to the same degree.

A speech and language therapist will assess your communication skills and work with you and your family to find ways to improve your communication.

Examples of problems
You may have problems with one or several of the following:

Understanding
You may understand what is going on around you, but the words you hear may not make sense, eg. English may sound like a foreign language.

OR
You may understand short and very simple sentences, but have difficulty with longer or more complicated instructions.

OR
You may have difficulty following the detail of a story, or the plot of a TV programme, or conversation in a group.
Speaking

- Your speech may be slurred, quiet, or not very clear (possibly due to your speech muscles being weak).
- Your speech may not flow very well if you have problems saying the right words, or putting words into sentences.
- Your speech may flow easily, but not make much sense.
- You may say a different word from the one that you mean (eg. “table” for “chair”).
- You may mix up the sounds in words (eg. “cup” may be said as “tup”).
- You may only be able to say a few set words or phrases.
- You may not be able to say the right word at all.

Reading and writing

- Some people will have difficulty understanding what they read.
- Some people will have problems with spelling and writing.

Medical terms

The medical terms for some speech and language problems are explained below (please ask the speech and language therapist for more information).

Aphasia (or Dysphasia):
Language is impaired due to the effects of the stroke on the brain. This affects understanding and expression for speaking. Reading and writing can also be affected.

Dysarthria:
Difficulty speaking due to weakness of the speech muscles (eg. the lips and tongue).

Dyspraxia:
Difficulty coordinating the muscles used for speaking - the muscles may not necessarily be weakened or paralysed, but they do not work when you want them to.

What can I expect?
This is not an easy question to answer, and recovery varies from person to person.

Although a stroke occurs suddenly, recovery can be very gradual.

Communication problems tend to take longer to recover than physical problems.
The speech and language therapist will be happy to offer further help and advice.

Tips for partners, family and carers
Communication problems after a stroke can be very distressing and frustrating. The speech and language therapist may offer the following advice to your partner, family or carer.

- If your relative usually needs a hearing aid or glasses, make sure these are still available.
- Cut down on background noise (eg. turn off the television) to help them to concentrate.
- Your relative may understand more than you think, so don’t talk about them as if they are not there.
- Include them in the conversation, and continue to talk about their interests as before.
- But don’t talk down to them, or raise your voice - they have not lost their intelligence, or their hearing.
- Try not to overload them with information. Give them time to take in what you say.
- Use facial expression/miming to help them understand you better.
- Have a pen and paper available to write down key words as you are talking, as this may help them understand what you are saying.
- Find out whether they want you to help them find the words to say.
- Encourage any attempts at communication, eg. speech, pointing, miming, writing, etc. but try not to put too much pressure on them, as this can increase their frustration.
- Once you have understood what your relative is trying to communicate, accept it and carry on. Don’t keep asking them to repeat words to get them right.
- Continuing to talk to your relative will help with their recovery.