

Layton Aging & Alzheimer's Disease Center

Primary Progressive Aphasia (PPA)

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What is Primary Progressive Aphasia (PPA)? PPA is a rare disorder involving the degeneration of brain cells primarily controlling the ability to use language. Other mental functions, such as memory, reasoning, visual perception, and the ability to do daily activities remain fairly normal but decline as the disorder progresses. PPA occurs in persons under 65 and more often among men than women.

What are the symptoms of PPA? Early symptoms commonly include gradual difficulty in one or more of the following language functions -- speaking, understanding, reading and writing. Some examples of problems in these areas are:

- substituting an incorrect word (e.g. "hook" for "coat hanger") or mispronounced word (e.g. "track" for "truck")
- inability to follow conversations or verbal instructions
- inability to read or write a letter
- decreasing content in speech or garbled speech to eventually becoming mute

How is PPA diagnosed? Diagnosis generally involves (1) a careful medical history and neurological examination (2) neuropsychological examination to assess for the specific alterations in thinking ability and performance and the degree of impairment and (3) brain imaging (CT or MRI scans) to rule out other causes of symptoms. A two year duration of language impairment as the primary and initial symptom is a key indicator. A speech and language evaluation is important to assess language ability in detail.

What treatment is available? At present there is no cure for the degenerative diseases causing PPA. The treatment goal is to improve the person's ability to communicate effectively. An evaluation by a Speech-Language Pathologist is important to assess language ability to (1) focus the treatment on the impaired language skills, e.g., word retrieval and (2) recommend augmentative/alternative communication strategies and devices. Examples of nonverbal communication techniques used are communication notebooks, gesturing, drawing, and the use of computerized communication devices. Involvement of family and social network in training and practice with alternative communication strategies will enhance the success of the treatment plan. Periodic evaluations to identify the patterns of language decline are recommended for the ongoing plan of treatment.

What resources are available for individuals and families?

A social worker can assist with employment issues --applying for social security disability, referring for vocational rehabilitation and identifying sources of family support for coping with this transition. Often families need to learn from other families who have experienced PPA. A support network of PPA families affiliated with the Northwestern Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago have agreed to be contacted check www.brain.northwestern.edu or phone (312) 908-9432. Another resource is the National Aphasia Association www.aphasia.org or 1-800-922-4622.