A speech-language pathologist is professionally trained to evaluate, diagnose and treat patients who have difficulty speaking, swallowing or understanding the speech of others.
Abnormal speech, language, cognitive and/or swallowing function can be caused by disease, illness, developmental delay or physical defect. Professional speech-language pathologists are trained to determine the cause and treatment strategy for disordered communication. They also work with other professionals to help patients who have cognitive or swallowing problems.

**What is disordered communication?**

Communication is disordered if speech or language:
- interferes with the dynamic nature of the speaking
- causes the speaker to have difficulty with the demands of daily living
- causes the listener to react to the speaker rather than to what has been said.

A person who has experienced a stroke, or a child who has developmental delay, may have difficulty speaking and understanding. Speech therapy can help establish functional and purposeful communicative skills.

Evaluation for head trauma, cancer, or psychiatric conditions may include a speech-language pathology examination if speech, language or swallowing are affected. Dementia or a general deterioration of mental activity, memory or reasoning skills may also require speech-language assessment.

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**Speech and Language Examination**

A speech and language exam involves careful assessment of the patient’s oral facial structure (jaw, lips, tongue, throat, voicebox) and function, in addition to the following components of speech and language:
- Articulation (the way sounds are formed)
- Phonation (sounds produced at the level of the larynx or voicebox)
- Resonation (modification of sound)
- Respiration (breath support for speech)
- Prosody (speaking rhythm and rate)

The exam may include an assessment of verbal expression; auditory and visual comprehension and retention; or word recall. It may also include higher-order language skills, such as abstract thought, calculation and writing. For nonverbal patients special instruments, including a computer, can be adapted for the exam.

**Swallowing Evaluation**

A swallowing evaluation may be needed in some instances. This evaluation includes assessment of the oral facial structure, observation of laryngeal function (voicebox), and a special X-ray called videofluoroscopy.

Under fluoroscopy, the patient is asked to swallow various consistencies of food mixed with barium (a special contrast solution that helps outline the structures of the throat).

Following the instrumental exam, results and recommendations are shared with the patient and family. Recommendations may include diet modifications, compensatory techniques, and/or therapy.

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**Computer-Assisted Communication**

Individuals who are unable to speak may be trained to use augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) devices. These special computers help nonverbal patients of all ages and abilities express themselves. Thanks to technological advances, the tone and character of computer-generated speech has become more pleasing and natural to listeners’ ears.

All examination results are explained to the patient and family in detail. The results may also be shared with the patient’s personal physician.

Patients who wear glasses, dentures or hearing aids should bring those items with them to the exam.

If necessary, a companion and/or an interpreter should accompany the patient to the exam to help obtain medical information.

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For further information on speech-language pathology services please call:

Physical Medicine Department
Lakeview Hospital Campus
(651) 430-4622
www.lakeview.org