

Staying Connected through Communication Head and Neck Cancer Changes Communication

Staying connected requires working together. Let others know what you need.

Communicating with others when you have speech or voice changes with head and neck cancer:

1. Give yourself some grace.

You are doing the best you can for what your body will allow you to do right now.

2. Explain how others can help you during conversations.

Many people are not familiar with how speech or voice changes make communication difficult. Let your family and friends know what you might find challenging, such as dry mouth, speaking clearly or fluently, or needing more time to communicate. Try this sentence: "I have difficulty with _____. It helps me when you _____ when we talk."

3. Take your time.

It may take more time or effort to get the words out in the way you want to. Ask for more time to finish what you have to say. Make deliberate plans to have important conversations or appointments when you feel most rested, and not rushed.

4. Use other ways of getting your thoughts across.

If you have difficulty speaking, consider using other forms of communication, such as writing, texting, text-to-speech apps. Gestures and facial expressions can also add expression to your message, if they are comfortable for you.

5. Communicate in a quieter environment; have face-to-face conversations.

Turn off the TV, radios, or other noise distractions. Try to have conversations in quiet places where you can be face to face. Avoid having conversations with someone who is in a different room or far away from you.

6. Connect with people with similar experiences.

As much as your family and friends care about you, they may not fully understand what you are experiencing. Connect with professionals who have expertise in the area or other people with similar experiences. Here are some examples:

- a. **Ask your doctor to refer you to a speech-language pathologist.** Speech-language pathologists often work with people with speech or voice changes due to head and neck cancer to help them manage their day to day activities and to communicate with other people.
- b. **Connect with groups in-person.** Look for voice groups that may be meeting near you for support and camaraderie. Your doctor or other healthcare provider may know of some groups.
- c. **Connect with safe online groups.** Online groups allow you to connect with people with similar experiences but do not live near you. Consider groups backed by a reputable organization, or with strong moderators who keep content safe.

7. Sometimes staying connected does not require conversation.

Invite loved ones to do something that you enjoy together that does not depend on a lot of speaking such as watching a TV show or movie together, or going on a scenic walk that you find enjoyable and relaxing.



<https://sites.uw.edu/speac/ab>

Communicating with a family member or friend with speech changes and head and neck cancer:

1. Give yourself some grace.

Sometimes finding the right thing to say and to support your loved one is difficult. While you want to be present for them, this impacts you too, and it is ok to acknowledge that.

2. Be patient and give them time to speak.

The pace of conversation may be different since speaking could take longer or require more breaks for your loved one. It is helpful to intentionally set time aside for important conversations. Be patient and give them time to communicate their thoughts.

3. Listen actively.

Listen attentively to what they are saying, even if their speech is difficult to understand. Show them that you are interested in what they have to say. Pay attention to other ways that they are telling you their story, such as facial expressions or gestures. Focus on their ideas and thoughts rather than their speech.

4. Avoid interrupting or intervening.

Interrupting their speaking can be frustrating and can make communication more difficult. Allow them to finish speaking before responding. Trying to help by finishing their sentences can be frustrating and can lead to miscommunication.

5. Be supportive and understanding.

Your loved one may feel self-conscious, embarrassed, or frustrated about their speech. Remind them that they are more than their speech.

6. Ask them how you can support their communication.

Ask your loved one what might help to make your conversations more successful. What works for one person might be different than what might work for another person. Be willing to explore new ways for communicating.

7. Communicate in a quieter environment.

Turn off the TV, radio, or other noisy distractions. Have conversations in quiet places, preferably face-to-face.

8. Sometimes staying connected does not require conversation.

People with speech challenges may require more effort to speak. If speaking becomes frustrating, suggest activities that do not involve a lot of conversation such as watching a show together, going on a walk together, or other activities that your loved one finds enjoyable and relaxing.

RESOURCES:

- Head and Neck Cancer Alliance: <https://headandneck.org/>
- American Head and Neck Society: <https://www.ahns.info/>
- National Head and Neck Cancer Foundation: <https://www.headandneckcancerfoundation.org/>
- Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer: <https://www.spohnc.org/>
- The Oral Cancer Foundation: <https://oralcancerfoundation.org/>
- CancerCare: https://www.cancercare.org/diagnosis/head_neck_cancer



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