Stuttering

Speech Pathology Australia

Stuttering is a speech disorder that causes interruptions in the rhythm or flow of speech.

These interruptions may include repeated sounds (*c-c-can*), syllables (*da-da-daddy*), words (*and-and-and*) or phrases (*I want-I want-I want*). Repetitions might happen once (*b-ball, can-can*) or multiple times (*I-I-I-I-I want, m-m-m-m-m-m-mummy*). Stuttering may also include prolongations, where sounds or parts of the word are stretched out (*caaaaan I go*) and blocks. Blocks are often silent and are seen when it looks like the person is stuck, trying to speak with no sound coming out. There are often secondary behaviours which accompany stuttering. These may be verbal and include grunts, small non-speech sounds, filler words (*um/er*) or pauses. They can also be non-verbal like grimacing, blinking or body movements.

The exact cause of stuttering is unknown. Speech disorders are thought to be caused by differences in brain activity related to speech production. This means that stuttering is not usually caused or triggered by an event, person, experience, stress or anxiety. Some people inherit a predisposition to stutter.

Who does stuttering affect?

Stuttering can affect children, adolescents and adults. Around 1% of the population experiences stuttering at any given time and as many as 5% across a life time. Stuttering usually starts in early childhood, often by the age of three. It may start gradually over days, week or months, or it can be sudden, over hours or a day. Stuttering may change in type or frequency over time. It may decrease or seem to go away for periods of time.

Recent research in Australia indicates that 8.5% of 3 year old children experience stuttering.

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Not all children who start stuttering will continue. As many as 70-75% of children who start to stutter are thought to recover naturally without treatment. This natural recovery might occur quickly or take as long as a couple of years from when it first started. It is not possible to determine who will experience natural recovery, but adolescents and adults are very unlikely to experience natural recovery.

What is the impact of stuttering?

Stuttering can affect people of all ages. Preschool and school aged children may experience force or tension when they speak, negative responses by others and an awareness of their stuttering. As children who stutter get older, they are more likely to have negative attitudes about their stuttering, be teased or have social difficulties. These can continue into adulthood. Adults who stutter are more likely to avoid speaking situations and may not always express their opinions. They may also experience anxiety about speaking. Stuttering may also limit a person's educational or occupational opportunities.

Treatment for Children

Early intervention from a speech pathologist is recommended for children who stutter. This is thought to be the best time to reduce stuttering. Currently, The Lidcombe Program of Early Stuttering Intervention has the strongest research evidence for children under the age of 6 years. There is also research to support use of this program with primary school age children. New treatment programs are currently being researched and developed.

Treatment for Adolescents and Adults

Treatment for adolescents and adults targets both changing stuttered speech using speech restructuring techniques and addressing the anxiety that can accompany stuttering. Research trials have found the use of prolonged or smooth speech techniques to have positive results in reducing and managing stuttering in adolescents and adults.

When and where to seek help?

Speech Pathologists are the only professionals trained to assess, treat and manage stuttering. Some speech pathologists specialise in the assessment and treatment of stuttering.

It is recommended that anyone worried about stuttering is assessed by a speech pathologist who can then provide them with more individualised information. A speech pathologist may recommend monitoring stuttering in a young child or commencing treatment, depending on how long the child has been stuttering and the impact it is having on their communication, social interaction and family.

For school-aged children, adolescents and adults, it is recommended that treatment is sought as soon as possible to avoid or reduce the impact of stuttering on well-being and daily life.

How do I become a speech pathologist?
Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree. To find out more go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?
Go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.