

Stuttering

Stuttering is a problem in which your child's speech is interrupted by pauses or repeated sounds. It commonly occurs around the time your child's language skills are developing most rapidly. Stuttering may get worse in situations that are stressful for your child. Stuttering usually clears up within a few months. If it doesn't, speech therapy may be helpful.

What is stuttering?

Stuttering is a common speech problem. Your child may repeat or have trouble making certain sounds, especially at the beginning of words. If your child starts feeling nervous about his or her speech problem, it may seem to get worse. Stuttering is sometimes known as “stammering.”

Stuttering is most common in toddlers and preschoolers, who are at a stage where they are gaining language skills very rapidly. It is almost never a sign of serious disease or mental health problems.

Most children stop stuttering within a few months. In others, the problem goes on longer. If stuttering becomes a lasting problem for your child, speech therapy can be helpful.

What does it look like?

- The normal flow of your child's speech is broken up or interrupted. He or she may pause frequently when speaking or repeat sounds several times, especially at the beginning of words. Your child just seems to have a hard time “getting the words out.”
- Stuttering may be more noticeable when your child is feeling stressed, excited, or just self-conscious about stuttering. In other situations, he or she may have no problem speaking smoothly and fluently.
- In some children you may notice other movements of the face, as if he or she is really struggling to speak. These “struggle behaviors” may include rapid eye blinking, trembling of the lips or jaw, and other movements of the face and upper body.

What causes stuttering?

- Most of the time, stuttering is a “developmental” issue—just a step in your child's language development process. Children with this form of stuttering usually outgrow it.
- Stuttering can be related to psychological or emotional issues. However, most of the time the emotional issues are caused by the stuttering, not the other way around! Feeling anxious about stuttering tends to make the problem worse.

- Other causes—such as brain injuries or serious mental illness—are rare.

What are some possible complications of stuttering?

- Stuttering is rarely a sign of any serious abnormality or illness.
- Stuttering can be an embarrassing problem for your child. Unfortunately, children who stutter are sometimes teased. Besides this type of social problem, there are no real “complications” of stuttering.

What increases your child's risk of stuttering?

- It is most common between the ages of 2 and 6.
- It is more common in boys than in girls.

How is stuttering treated?

- Most of the time, no treatment is needed. Most children “outgrow” stuttering within a few months, as their language skills continue to develop.
- Meanwhile, several steps can help reduce the pressure on your child when he or she is speaking:
 - Provide a relaxed environment. Encourage your child to take his or her time when speaking. Let your child know that you are listening. Speak in a slow, relaxed manner yourself.
 - Don't criticize, tease, or punish your child for stuttering.
 - Don't focus too much attention on the stuttering or act as if it's a major problem. However, if your child brings up the subject, talk openly about it.
 - Be wary of programs or “cures” for stuttering advertised on the Internet or elsewhere. Some have not been scientifically tested; others use medications or electronic devices that can have side effects. It's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting your child on any kind of treatment program.
- If your child is still stuttering after 6 months, we may recommend further evaluation or treatment. Evaluation may also be recommended for children whose stuttering is accompanied by “struggle behaviors.”
- A specialist (called a speech-language pathologist) can provide expert testing, diagnosis, and treatment of stuttering. A speech specialist can teach your child helpful approaches to speaking more fluently.

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- Treatment may also address some of the psychological or emotional side effects of stuttering, such as fear of speaking in front of people.
- Most children can be helped with treatment and follow-up. Stuttering in adulthood is relatively rare.
- Your child's stuttering doesn't improve within 6 months or if it seems to be getting worse.
- Your child's stuttering is accompanied by "struggle behaviors" such as eye blinking or other facial movements.
- You have questions about treatments for your child's stuttering.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if: