

Foreign Accent Syndrome

Foreign Accent Syndrome (FAS) was conceived by Neuro-Linguistic Harry Whitaker in 1982 which is also similar to Dysprosody. It is a rare motor speech disorder and a person with this condition sounds as if they are speaking with an accent from a different country.

What Causes this Rare Condition?

Our brain controls our speech and any damage or impact on brain functions can lead to Foreign Accent Syndrome. The frontal areas of the left hemisphere and the subcortical areas are involved in the production and articulation of speech and damage to these areas can cause Foreign Accent Syndrome.

This speech disorder may suddenly cause the person to speak in a foreign accent and causes subsequent loss of distinctive characteristics of their native language. Many factors cause trigger factors to this rare condition such as:

- Stroke to the brain
- Trauma to the brain due to a sharp blow to the skull by an object or a hit to the wall
- Bleeding in the brain
- Multiple sclerosis
- Brain tumour
- Conversion Disorder
- Severe Headache
- Migraine

Factors related to hereditary, psychological or caused by a brain injury, even increasing obsessive digital culture and sedentary lifestyle may also cause Foreign Accent Syndrome. In most cases, the patients develop this syndrome *suddenly*.

Is it Similar to Developing a New Accent?



Image

Source:

<https://www.nncionline.org/course/foreign-accent-syndrome/>

Normally, people who migrate to another country from their native place for a longer duration of time or permanently develop to speak accent belonging to the country they are living in. People inculcate the local accent of the city or country they are living in to communicate with locals easily. When a person returns to their native place, people around them can easily understand their changed accent when they speak.

It's important to know that such kind of change is normal when a person changes accent to a foreign one as they adopt an accent spoken of their place of residence and should not be confused with suffering from Foreign Accent Syndrome.

Only when there is sudden change or alteration from a person's native accent to a foreign accent, there is a disorder or damage to the brain or exposure to diseases that require medical expertise to diagnose and treat the condition.

Some Famous Cases of Foreign Accent Syndrome

One of the classic examples related to Foreign Accent Syndrome was that of Ms Sarah Colwill, a British lady who suffered from a severe migraine attack and woke up speaking with a Chinese accent. After this incident, this disorder was named a Chinese foreign accent.

Another known case of Foreign Accent Syndrome was reported in 1941 of a Norwegian woman who suffered shrapnel injuries to her brain and started speaking with a fluent German accent due to which she was shunned by her compatriots as she sounded like a foreign enemy which was reported by CNN report.

There are some cases reported in India as well, one of which was reported by India Today Magazine about a teenager who suffered concussions in the brain while playing a soccer game and was hospitalised. The teenager who was in a coma suddenly woke up speaking fluent Spanish, leaving the parents and doctors astonished.

What Symptoms Does Foreign Accent Syndrome Present?

The common language changes include— American English to British English, Spanish to Hungarian, Japanese to Korean, among others.

- A change in the pronunciation of vowels and use of consonants may be seen

- Many words with the pronunciation of “uh” along with words can be observed
- Few errors in voice while speaking like the use of *pake* instead of *bake* and also joining the wrong sentences together
- Other common speech changes that happen when a person suffers from Foreign Accent Syndrome are – vowel and consonant distortion, voicing errors, unusual prosody and trouble with consonant clusters can be observed.

While a layman may feel a person with Foreign Accent Syndrome is deliberately trying to mimic a foreign Accent, it is not so! At times, the shift to a foreign accent occurs so randomly and fast that the person suffering from it might not even notice it but becomes noticeable by people around them.

What Does Foreign Accent Syndrome Cause?

Individuals with Foreign Accent Syndrome may develop the following conditions–

- Increased risk for stroke
- Aphasia problems while understanding and expressing language
- Speech apraxia making sounds, syllables and words
- There may be an addition, removal, or substitution of sounds while speaking “Suh-trike” instead of strike
- The pitch or tone of certain sounds may be pronounced differently.

When Should One Seek Help for Foreign Accent Syndrome?

When there is a sudden change in the way a person speaks– from normal speech to another accent, can be a serious sign of an

underlying issue. It is important to seek immediate medical attention.

How is Foreign Accent Syndrome Diagnosed?



Image

Source:

<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/foreign-accent-syndrome/story?id=40071887>

Firstly, when a person seeks medical help the doctor will ask for the symptoms and health history. A complete physical examination is usually done. Muscles used to speak are examined.

Mental health checkup and brain activity tests are done to rule out causative factors of Foreign Accent Syndrome.

Language skills can be tested by reading, writing and language comprehension tests. Other tests like recordings to analyse

speech patterns with images to be taken of the brain by MRI and CT scan. Single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) scan and PET scan may be done in some cases. The brain's electrical activity is measured using an Electroencephalogram (EEG).

This rare disorder usually requires a multidisciplinary team to evaluate and diagnose it.

What Does Treatment Involve?

Treatment for Foreign Accent Syndrome depends on the underlying cause. If there are no underlying conditions, possible treatments may include:

- **Speech therapy:** To help the patient recreate their previous accent through vocal exercises that are targeted at helping them pronounce sounds deliberately in a regular accent.
- **Counselling Therapy or Groups:** These can help support the issues that patients face in daily life due to their Foreign Accent Syndrome. Common among these issues is people thinking that they are faking their new accent or feelings that you've lost a part of your identity which may demoralise or cause sadness. To combat such issues counselling sessions play a pivotal role. Also, Behavioural Therapy, strategies to help cultivate positivity and healthy habits to deplete negative, destructive thoughts, feelings or habits.

If there is an underlying medical condition causing Foreign Accent Syndrome, the patient may need one of the following treatments:

- *For Brain Stroke*, medicines like anti-clotting medications or surgically removing the clot from the blood vessel can be done. A low dose of a blood thinner like aspirin can prevent any clots from occurring.

- *For Brain injuries*, medicines like anti-seizure medications for major injuries, Diuretics to reduce pressure in your brain, or surgery to repair any major damage to the brain.
- *For aneurysms*, surgical clipping of blood vessels to stop blood flow to an aneurysm can be done.
- *For Multiple Sclerosis*, disease-modifying therapies to slow the progress of MS and a high dose of corticosteroids can be given to slow MS.

If there is a history of strokes in the family, it is important to follow a few steps to prevent Foreign Accent Syndrome:

- Regular health checkups to monitor BP and regular blood sugar checks.
- Patients are advised to exercise regularly and maintain optimum body weight
- Avoid excessive consumption of alcohol and smoking
- A speech therapist to improve the accent.
- Counselling by health counsellor to cope up with the condition
- A speech-language specialist doctor can help diagnose exactly the extent of language changes. Tests to rule out speech disorders and aphasia may be recommended.
- A neurologist can identify possible causes of FAS symptoms by investigations like MRI and CT Scan which can interpret the activity of the brain with speech.
- A psychologist can help cope with the social and emotional effects of a new accent. Also, any underlying mental disease triggering FAS can be medicated upon.

There are no guidelines to prevent this health condition. One of the most common causes of this condition is a stroke, which should be treated to lower the risk of Foreign Accent Syndrome.

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