Diagnosis of PPA

The Neurobehavior and Memory Clinic at Northwestern Medicine (https://www.nm.org/conditions-and-care-areas/neurosciences/neurobehavior-and-memory-clinic) is affiliated with our center and offers clinical consultations to patients, families and providers, including diagnostic evaluations, second opinions and supportive services.

Primary progressive aphasia (PPA) is relatively uncommon. There is no one test to diagnose PPA; instead, the diagnosis is made through a process of "ruling in" and "ruling out." These factors contribute to the long diagnostic journey some experience.

Components of a PPA evaluation can include obtaining medical history from the individual with language concerns and family, neurological exam and cognitive assessment by a neuropsychologist and laboratory measures (e.g., blood work, cerebrospinal fluid analysis and brain imaging with MRI or PET).

During the neurological exam, the clinician will use the information provided by the family about symptom onset and the laboratory measures to confirm that symptoms are not due to other causes (e.g., vitamin deficiencies, tumor, stroke, infection).

There are newer tests that may assist in determining the likely underlying neuropathology responsible for the symptoms. These include amyloid PET and lumbar puncture (spinal tap) to examine protein levels in cerebrospinal fluid. These procedures may not be covered by insurance and may not be appropriate for everyone. Scientists are working to identify new reliable biomarkers. Our center is actively involved in these studies.

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