

Swallow Resource Pack

Dysphagia (Swallowing Difficulties)

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Chewing and swallowing food and drink is a complex process which uses many different muscles and nerves working in a coordinated manner. Dysphagia is the term used to describe a difficulty with chewing and swallowing food, drink and / or saliva.

Swallowing problems may occur when a person has had a neurological event, such as brain injury or stroke. Conditions such as Multiple Sclerosis, Motor Neurone Disease and Parkinson's Disease can also cause dysphagia.

Problems can occur with:

- Chewing and moving food and drink around the mouth.
- Food and drink going down the 'wrong way'. This may result in food and drink entering the lungs and causing a chest infection.

Signs and Symptoms:

- Difficulty chewing or swallowing.
- A delayed or effortful swallow.
- Multiple swallows for each mouthful.
- Choking or coughing before, during or after swallowing.
- A 'gurgly' voice after swallowing.
- Watery eyes, red face or trying to catch your breath when eating or drinking.
- Taking a very long time to eat and becoming tired.
- Frequent chest infections.
- Unintentional weight loss.

What does a Speech and Language Therapist do?

Speech and Language Therapists are involved because the muscles and nerves used for chewing and swallowing are also those used for speech.

Speech and Language Therapists are trained to:

- Identify the problem.
- Establish why it is occurring.
- Advise whether it is safe to eat and drink.
- Suggest how to make eating and drinking easier.

The Speech and Language Therapist will be able to assess your swallow by observing the swallowing process. Sometimes an instrumental assessment may also be used. This may be a Videofluoroscopy (a moving x-ray), or alternatively a Fibreoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES), which involves passing a small camera through your nose.

Advice for Safe Swallowing

- Ensure you sit upright to eat and drink.
- Your head should be slightly tilted forwards with chin tucked in.
- Stay sitting upright for 30 minutes after eating and drinking.
- Eat and drink when you are most alert.
- Eating and drinking is tiring. Try to eat 'little and often' with appropriate snacks between meals.
- Ensure you can concentrate on eating and drinking and are not distracted by the television, radio or conversation.
- Try not to talk with your mouth full.
- Take your time – do not rush.
- Take small mouthfuls – a teaspoon may help.
- Do not have hard-to-chew foods.
- Make sure your mouth is clear of food and drink before taking the next mouthful. You may need to swallow more than once to clear each mouthful.
- If one side of your mouth is stronger, place food on that side. Check the weaker side to ensure no food is stuck there.
- Contact your Doctor, Speech and Language Therapist or Dietitian if you notice any signs or symptoms of dysphagia.

Difficult Foods

Mixed textures	Mixing liquids and solids can cause you to choke on the liquids whilst chewing solids e.g. meat in thin gravy, cereal with milk, minestrone soup.
Stringy textures	These can be hard to chew and may result in some bits being left behind in the mouth or throat, causing choking e.g. runner beans, stringy meat.
Foods with skins	Anything with an outside skin or husk can get left in the mouth after the food has been swallowed and can be hard to chew e.g. sweetcorn, peanuts.
Floppy textures	Foods with a floppy texture can be difficult to chew and swallow e.g. cucumber slices, lettuce.
Sticky foods	Sticky foods may stick to the teeth and roof of the mouth. If you have difficulties with tongue movements it may be difficult to remove this residue e.g. toffees, white bread.
Crumbly foods	Crumbly foods may cause choking if the crumbs are inhaled e.g. biscuits, cakes and pastry.
Coarse textures	Coarse textures, such as haddock or tough meat, may be hard to swallow. Try adding a thick sauce.
Hard food	Some food is hard and difficult to chew. This could lead to choking e.g. nuts, foods with pips or stones, pieces of raw apple.
Liquids	Many people find swallowing liquids more difficult than solids. This is because liquid does not hold a shape for more than a second and can trickle over the back of the tongue. Some people find milkshakes and fruit smoothies easier to drink as they are thicker. Your SLT may also recommend a thickening agent to thicken drinks.