NHS
University Hospitals
Coventry and Warwickshire
NHS Trust

Speech and Language Therapy

Swallowing difficulties

Swallowing difficulties, also known as dysphagia, may result in food or drink going down the wrong way into the airway. This is called aspiration. Someone may also have difficulties with moving food around their mouth or chewing.

Causes of dysphagia

Dysphagia can be caused by a variety of factors, including

- Head or brain injury
- Stroke
- Dementia
- Critical illness
- Head and neck surgery
- Cancer
- Neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, etc.

Signs of Aspiration

When food or drink enters a person's airway instead of going down the esophagus, this is called aspiration. Signs of this include:

- Losing food or drink from the mouth.
- Regularly clearing your throat or coughing while eating and drinking.
- Food or drink coming back up after swallowing.
- A 'wet bubbling' voice.
- Breathing difficulties when eating and drinking.

- Eyes watering and a red face when eating or drinking.

Sometimes, a person may not show any of these signs, even though food and drink are going down the wrong way. This is called silent aspiration. A Speech and Language therapist can further investigate this if felt necessary.

Risks associated with dysphagia

- Choking
- Regular chest infections or aspiration pneumonia
- Malnutrition and/or dehydration
- Weight loss
- Reduced quality of life or loss of enjoyment from eating and drinking

For some individuals, the above risks can potentially contribute to death.

Assessment and management

A Speech and Language therapist will assess the risk of aspiration during eating and drinking.

They may suggest changes in the texture or consistency of diet and fluids, adjustments in eating and drinking position, swallowing techniques, or provide swallowing therapy.

If a patient is on modified diet and fluid, a yellow sign from the Speech and Language therapist will be placed above the patient's bed to provide guidance on the latest recommendations.

What if eating and drinking isn't safe?

If there is a risk of food or drink going into the lungs, alternative ways of providing fluids and nutrition may be reviewed by the medical team, such as:

- An intravenous drip, known as an 'IV': Fluids and nutrients are delivered directly into the bloodstream.
- A nasogastric tube that passes through the nose and down into the stomach, known as a 'NG Tube.

- A tube that passes directly into the stomach. This is most commonly a ‘PEG’ tube.

For some, the above options may be felt to be unsuitable for a variety of reasons. In such situations, it may be considered to continue eating and drinking with the risk of aspiration.

Advice for eating and drinking

- Sit upright when eating and drinking.
- Stay sitting upright for 30 minutes after eating.
- Make sure you are alert. Avoid eating and drinking if you are very tired.
- Concentrate on eating and drinking, avoid distractions such as watching TV or talking to others at the same time.
- Take your time and don’t rush.
- Take small mouthfuls.
- Make sure your mouth is clear before taking another mouthful. You may need more than 1 swallow to clear a mouthful.
- Avoid mixing food and drink in the same mouthful.
- Avoid using straws or beakers unless specifically required. These can increase the risk of things going down the wrong way for some people.

If you are having problems swallowing medicines, please speak to your doctor for advice.

Further Information

If you have any questions about the information in this leaflet, please contact the Speech and Language therapy team on 024 7696 5709.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 5709 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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Document History	
Department:	Speech and Language Therapy
Contact:	25709
Updated:	October 2024
Review:	October 2026
Version:	2
Reference:	HIC/LFT/2187/17