

What is Dysphagia? - Community - A Guide for Carers and Family

An information guide



What is Dysphagia? - Community

Dysphagia is the medical term for problems swallowing. It is the inability to chew or swallow normally, disrupting the journey of food or fluid from the mouth to the stomach.

Dysphagia can occur in people with a wide range of illnesses, and is a common problem for residents in Care Homes

The normal swallow

When you eat or drink, the food or liquid passes down your food pipe into your stomach. It is important during this journey that your airway is closed so that the food/drink cannot spill down into your lungs. This is known as aspiration, and if this happens you are at risk of developing a chest infection or even pneumonia. At worst aspiration is life-threatening.

Symptoms

Symptoms of a swallowing problem may be obvious, such as coughing, choking or discomfort when eating/drinking. However, signs may be less obvious, such as a change in the breathing pattern or in the sound of a person's voice when swallowing or shortly after eating/drinking. Frequent chest infections may also indicate an unsafe swallow.

Other symptoms may include inadequate nutrition, dehydration and weight loss.

Dysphagia can cause distress and serious illness so it is important that these symptoms are recognised and treated quickly.

Who assesses for Dysphagia

The Speech and Language therapist (SLT) is an expert in identifying and treating swallowing problems. Initial assessment will take place in the care home. However in some instances the resident

may require further investigation such as an x-ray image of the swallow (Videofluoroscopy).

What can be done if a swallowing problem is identified?

The SLT will make recommendations according to the type of swallowing problem that has been diagnosed. It may be advised that only food/drink of a certain consistency should be eaten, to avoid any spillage into the airway. It may be advised that a powder is used to thicken drinks to a prescribed consistency to prevent the drink spilling into the airway.

Useful tips

If you are giving someone with dysphagia food or drink you can help them by:

- Consistently following the SLT's advice and written guidance
- Ensuring that any snacks given are suitable (ask Home staff)
- Ensure that they are sat upright. Ask for assistance if required
- **Do not** offer food/drink if they are sleepy: **this could be a choking risk**
- Discouraging talking whilst eating or drinking as this can increase the risk of things 'going down the wrong way'
- Avoiding using spouted beakers/straws unless suggested by a SLT.

Depending on the severity of the condition and the underlying cause of the problem, some swallowing problems can resolve. However for some people the swallow may not improve at all, or even get worse.

The SLT is always available to discuss any concerns you may have regarding a family member's swallowing problem, and contact details can be obtained from the care home.

If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service

Jeśli angielski nie jest twoim pierwszym językiem i potrzebujesz pomocy, skontaktuj się z działem tłumaczeń ustnych i pisemnych

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