

# What is Dysphagia?

An information guide



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If someone has dysphagia, this means they have difficulty in swallowing.

Dysphagia can occur in people with a range of illnesses, including stroke, Parkinson's disease, head injury, head and neck cancer and dementia.

## 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. 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 your breathing pattern or in the sound of your voice when swallowing or shortly after eating/drinking. Frequent chest infections may also indicate a swallowing disorder.

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

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

## **How do we assess you?**

The speech and language therapist (SLT) is an expert in identifying and treating swallowing problems. Assessment may include examining the inside of your mouth and movements of the tongue, watching you eat/drink different types of food, 'feeling' you swallow and listening to your breathing. In some instances you may require further investigation such as an x-ray image of your 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. Particular exercises may be advised and will be explained and demonstrated by the speech and language therapist.

It may be advised that only food/drink of a certain consistency should be eaten, to avoid any spillage into the airway. Drinks are thickened using a powder which can prevent the liquid going into the airway. This powder, called thickener, may be supplied whilst you are in hospital and will be prescribed by the GP upon discharge or if you are at home.

The food consistencies recommended by speech and language therapy in hospital are liquidised (blended but pourable), pureed (blended) minced and moist, soft and bite sized, or normal diet.

The fluid may be thickened to an extremely thick, mildly thick, moderately thick, or slightly thick consistency. The SLT will discuss any modification of diet and fluids in detail with you and will also provide written guidance to take home.

## Help for family members

### Useful tips

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

- Consistently following the SLT's advice/written guidance.
- Ensuring that any snacks given are suitable (ask ward 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.
- Encouraging them to practise any exercises left by the SLT.

### Will it get better?

It depends on the severity of the condition. Some swallowing problems resolve quickly, but others take longer to improve. Sometimes the problem may worsen, or the swallow may not improve at all. Alternative methods of feeding may need to be considered in these instances, such as a feeding tube. This might be a nasogastric tube (NGT) or a percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG tube). Nutrition would then be provided via one of these tubes in a liquid form advised by the clinician.

## **Specific advice**

Your relative will have a bed sign with their SLT eating/drinking recommendations above their bed. They will have individualised written recommendations and information on discharge.

## **More information**

Your speech and language therapist is

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If you need to, please contact the relevant speech and language department on:

Fairfield General Hospital – 0161 918 8570

North Manchester General Hospital – 0161 720 2232

Royal Oldham Hospital – 0161 627 8971

## Notes

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