

Patient Information

Dysphagia (swallowing problems)

Ears, Nose and Throat Department



What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia is the medical term for swallowing difficulties. It can result from a wide variety of medical conditions, including acute or progressive neurological conditions, trauma (injury), disease or as a result of surgery or medical treatments.

Swallowing problems might lead to food and drink entering the airway instead of the stomach; sometimes this can lead to the development of a chest infection. Dysphagia can make it difficult for you to eat enough to maintain your weight and good health.

How to recognise the signs and symptoms

Below are some of the signs and symptoms of dysphagia:

- Extra effort or time needed to chew or swallow.
- Food, liquid or saliva leaking from the mouth.
- Coughing or choking during, or immediately after, eating or drinking.
- Wet or 'gurgle' sounding voice during or after eating or drinking.
- Food sticking in your throat which is difficult to swallow.
- Repeated chest infections, chesty coughs or high temperatures.
- Weight loss or dehydration from not being able to eat or drink enough.

How is swallowing assessed?

If you have difficulty swallowing you will be assessed by a speech and language therapist. They will assess all the stages of swallowing, including how easy it is to control food when it is in your mouth, e.g. for chewing. They will also assess whether food or drink is "going down the wrong way", i.e. entering the trachea (windpipe) rather than the esophagus (food pipe), and give advice about management and treatment.

How is dysphagia managed?

There are a number of different ways to make swallowing safer:

- 1) **Diet/fluid modification** - The consistency of your food or drink may be changed, i.e. by using thickening powder in drinks; by blending food to make it smoother.
- 2) **Head postures** - You may be advised to keep your head in a specific position when swallowing (e.g. chin tuck; head tilt).
- 3) **Swallowing techniques** - You may be advised to use a special technique every time you swallow (e.g. breath-hold; effortful swallow).
- 4) **Swallow therapy** - You may be given exercises to do to help your swallowing (e.g. Masako; Mendelsohn). You will be given specific information about what helps you. Sometimes speech and language therapists recommend that no food, drink or medications are taken by mouth (nil by mouth). This is because there is a high risk of food or drink going into the trachea/lungs and possibly causing choking or a chest infection.

What can I do to help?

- Allow extra time for eating and drinking.
- Take small mouthfuls each time.
- Make sure you are sitting fully upright.
- Don't lean over to one side.
- Do not eat and drink when you are tired.
- Do not tilt your head backwards.
- Avoid talking with your mouth full.
- Make sure your mouth is clean after eating.
- Small, frequent meals may be easier to manage.

What should I do next?

If you notice any of the signs or symptoms listed on page 2, or any changes to your swallowing once you are home, please contact your speech and language therapist or your GP.

Useful Telephone Numbers

- Switchboard, Lister Hospital
☎ 01438 314333 - ask for ENT Department
- ENT Nurse Specialist (Monday to Friday, 9am - 5pm)
☎ Mobile: 0778 534 3359 or 0787 639 0290

In an emergency, dial 999 and request an ambulance or attend your nearest Emergency Department.

NHS 111 can help if you have an urgent medical problem and you're not sure what to do. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. ☎ 111

Useful websites:

www.entuk.org

www.rcslt.org

www.dysphagia.org.uk

www.nhs.uk/conditions/swallowing-problems-dysphagia/

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