

Swallowing Disorders

Swallowing disorders known as **dysphagia**, occur when there is a problem with the normal ability to swallow food and or liquids. Swallowing problems or dysphagia can occur for many reasons and may be temporary, permanent or degenerative (eg the difficulties become progressively worse).

Swallowing disorders can occur suddenly as a result of an injury, accident, stroke or disease. Some people may be born with difficulties such as cerebral palsy, malformations of the face and oral structures or developmental disabilities, which may affect eating, drinking and swallowing skills. Any disease or injury that directly affects the oral musculature or damage to the brain and causes impairment to the swallowing mechanism may result in a swallowing disorder.

Swallowing difficulties can be quite mild or even so severe that food and fluid cannot be taken by mouth and the individual must receive their nutrition via other means either temporarily, partially or permanently.

Swallowing difficulties can occur at any stage of the swallowing process:

- Problems with strength, movement, coordination and sensation of the oral muscles may cause difficulties with chewing, moving and collecting food, managing liquids and effectively clearing the mouth.
- Similar problems with the pharyngeal musculature or difficulties with triggering the swallow and cough reflexes may cause food to be trapped in the throat, pushed into the nasal passageways or into the airway and lungs causing aspiration or nasal regurgitation.
- Problems with the muscles of the oesophagus may result in narrowing or pocketing of food interrupting a smooth passage of food into the stomach or reflux of stomach contents.

As swallowing difficulties can be due to a variety of reasons, they need to be carefully investigated, usually by a speech pathologist with specialist skills in eating, drinking and swallowing in the first instance. If necessary a medical doctor or specialist (eg paediatrician, gastroenterologist, respiratory physician, ear nose & throat specialist) may also be consulted for specialised investigation and/or treatment.

Difficulties with swallowing should be treated immediately as they can have serious consequences. Inhalation of foreign material such as food and liquid is called aspiration and this in turn can lead to serious medical complications such as lung infections (Refer to Fact Sheet "Choking and Coughing at Mealtimes"). An awareness of the signs of swallowing problems is necessary for safe mealtime management of children and students who have swallowing disorders.



Signs of swallowing problems

- Weight loss and/or failure to thrive (grow well)
- Lengthy mealtimes (longer than 30mins)
- Refusal to eat or drink
- Taking a long time to open the mouth before beginning to eat/drink
- Difficulties biting, chewing and manipulating food in the mouth
- Weak and or poor control of the muscles of the face, mouth and tongue
- Unusual oral skills (eg tongue thrust or bite reflex)
- Drooling or poor saliva control
- Poor sensation of the face, oral or throat musculature
- Spitting or spillage of food/drink
- Slow or absent chewing
- Slow movement of food around the mouth
- Pocketing of food at the sides of the mouth
- Food remaining in the cheeks or mouth after swallowing
- Difficulties coping with certain types of food/liquids
- Difficulty initiating a swallow
- Delayed or slow swallow trigger
- Multiple swallows to clear food and fluid
- Difficulty coordinating breathing and swallowing
- Coughing, spluttering, gagging at mealtimes
- Discomfort swallowing whilst eating or drinking
- Inability to cough, or a weak cough
- Wet, gurgly voice during or immediately after swallowing or at mealtimes
- Nasal regurgitation (eg food or liquids in the nasal passageways) or frequent sneezing during a meal
- Gastric reflux and vomiting
- Sweating, pale face or glassy eyes during meals
- Recurrent chest infections/temperature changes.

There are many treatment options available to develop eating, drinking and swallowing skills. People with swallowing difficulties need to have specific intervention designed to meet their individual problems to ensure swallowing is safe. Specific treatments and mealtime management plans should be followed carefully to ensure safe swallowing.

