

# Swallowing Disorders (Dysphagia) in Adults

## What are Swallowing Disorders?

Swallowing disorders, also called dysphagia (dis-FAY-juh), can occur at different stages in the swallowing process.

- **Oral Phase (preparatory & initiation)**- sucking, chewing and moving food or liquid into the throat
- **Pharyngeal phase**-starting with the swallowing reflex, squeezing food down the throat, and closing off the airway to prevent food or liquid from entering the airway (aspiration) or to prevent choking
- **Esophageal phase**- relaxing and tightening the openings at the top and bottom of the feeding tube in the throat (esophagus) and squeezing food through the esophagus into the stomach

## Swallowing Revealed

### Oral Preparatory Phase

- Eating is anticipated
- Food is brought to the mouth
  - Bitten off
  - Taken from utensil
- Food is mixed with saliva and chewed when needed
- Liquids are sucked or sipped through a cup or straw
- Involuntary coordination of sucking, swallowing and breathing

### Oral Initiation Phase

- The food or liquid is collected
- Sealed between the roof of the mouth and the tongue
- The swallow allows the liquid to fall from mouth into pharynx
- Food is swallowed as the tongue moves toward the back of the throat (pharynx) with a stripping wave
- This begins the actual reflexive swallow

### Pharyngeal Phase

- Soft palate elevates to keep food from nose
- Tongue moves back
- Larynx moves up
- Epiglottis tilts down to guide the food past the airway
- Breathing stops
- Vocal folds come together
- Muscles of pharynx contract
- Upper esophageal sphincter relaxes

### Esophageal Phase

- Peristalsis (a wave of contraction) moved the food through the esophagus
- The lower esophageal sphincter relaxes to allow the food to pass into the stomach
- The lower esophageal sphincter then returns to a closed 'tonic' state to prevent regurgitation

## Common Causes of Swallowing Disorders

Several diseases, conditions or surgical interventions can result in swallowing problems.

- CVA/Stroke
- Cancer: lung cancer, esophageal cancer throat and mouth cancer
- History of pneumonia (especially right lower lobe)
- COPD
- Any degenerative disease (Parkinson's, Huntington's, Dementia, Alzheimer's, Muscular Sclerosis, ALS)
- Congestive Heart Failure
- Head Trauma

## Signs & Symptoms of Swallowing Disorders

- Coughing during or right after eating or drinking
- Wet or gurgly sounding voice during or after eating or drinking
- Extra effort or time needed to chew or swallow
- Food or liquid leaking from the mouth or getting stuck in mouth
- Recurring pneumonia or chest congestion after eating
- Weight loss or dehydration from not being able to eat enough

### *The Result of Swallowing Disorders...*

Poor nutrition or dehydration

Risk of aspiration (food or liquid entering the airway), which can lead to pneumonia

## Are They Aspirating?

- Eyes watering
- Changes in respiration rate
- Change in lung sounds
- Facial grimacing
- Gagging
- Chest pain
- Weight loss
- Dehydration
- Pneumonia or history of pneumonia
- Reddening of the face
- Difficulty breathing
- Audible breathing
- Coughing
- Gurgly voice quality
- High or low back pain
- Spiked fever
- Chronic copious clear secretions

## How Are Swallowing Disorders Diagnosed?

A speech-language pathologist (SLP) who specializes in swallowing disorders can evaluate individuals who are experiencing problems eating and drinking. The SLP will:

- Take a careful history of medical conditions and symptoms
- Look at the length of movement of the muscles involved in swallowing
- Observe feeding to see posture, behavior, and oral movements during eating and drinking
- Possibly perform special tests to evaluate swallowing, such as:

- **Modified Barium Swallow**-individual eats or drinks food or liquid with barium in it and then the swallowing process is viewed on an X-ray
- **Endoscopic Assessment**- a lighted scope is inserted through the nose and then the swallow can be viewed on a screen.

## **How Can a Speech Language Pathologist Help?**

Treatment depends on the cause, symptoms and type of swallowing problem. A speech language pathologist may recommend:

- Specific swallowing treatment (e.g., exercises to improve muscle movement)
- Evidence-based clinical tests and treatment strategies to improve function
- Positions or strategies to help the individual swallow more effectively
- Modifications to diet and specific food and liquid textures that are easier and safer to swallow