

Guide to swallowing difficulties (dysphagia)

Other formats

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Swallowing difficulties (dysphagia)

Swallowing difficulties, also known as dysphagia, may result in food and drink going down the wrong way into your airway. When this happens, it is called aspiration.

People with dysphagia may also find it difficult to move food around their mouth or chew.

Causes of dysphagia

These include: head/brain injury, stroke, dementia, critical illness, head and neck surgery and/or cancer, and neurological conditions e.g. a learning disability, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease etc.

Signs of aspiration

When food and drink go down the wrong way, this is called aspiration. Signs of this include:

- Difficulty keeping food or drink in your mouth
- Regularly clearing your throat or coughing whilst eating and drinking
- Food or drink coming back up after swallowing
- Having a 'wet bubbling' voice
- Breathing difficulties when eating and drinking
- Eyes watering and a red face when eating and drinking

Sometimes you may not show any of these signs despite food and drink going down the wrong way. This is called silent aspiration. A speech and language therapist can investigate this further.

Risks associated with dysphagia

- Choking
- Regular chest infections or aspiration pneumonia
- Malnutrition and/or dehydration
- Weight loss
- Reduced quality of life or loss of enjoyment from eating and drinking

For some people, the above risks can be really serious and life-threatening.

Assessment and management

A speech and language therapist will assess whether you have an aspiration risk when you eat and drink.

They may suggest changes to the texture or consistency of your food and drink, your position when eating and drinking, your swallow technique, or provide you with swallowing therapy.

The therapist may want to investigate your swallowing difficulties further, and may request further tests. These may be completed by a speech and language therapist or other medical teams.

What if eating and drinking isn't safe?

If there is a risk of food or drink going down the wrong way into your lungs, alternative ways of providing fluids and nutrition may be recommended by a doctor, such as:

- An intravenous drip, known as an 'IV'
- A nasogastric tube that passes through the nose and down into the stomach, known as an 'NG Tube'
- A tube that passes directly into the stomach. This is most commonly a 'PEG' tube.

The above options may not be suitable for a variety of reasons, and therefore the doctor may recommend that you continue eating and drinking with the risk of aspiration. The doctor will discuss this with you.

Advice for eating and drinking

- Make sure you sit upright when eating and drinking
- Stay sitting upright for 30 minutes after eating
- Make sure you are alert. If you suffer with fatigue, try to eat and drink 'little and often'.
- Make sure you concentrate on eating and drinking e.g. turn the TV off, don't talk to others at the same time.

- Take your time, don't rush.
- Take small mouthfuls.
- Make sure your mouth is clear before you have more. You may need more than one swallow to clear a mouthful.
- Avoid mixing food and drink in the same mouthful.
- Avoid using a straw or beaker unless specifically required. For some people, these can increase the risk of things going down the wrong way.

If you are having problems with swallowing medication, please speak to your doctor for advice.

Further information and referrals

Referrals to our speech and language therapy service can be made by yourself, your doctor or another health professional. Please use the contact details below if you would like more information:

Speech and Language Therapy, Barnstaple Health Centre, Vicarage Street, Barnstaple, North Devon, EX32 7BH.

Telephone Number: 01271 341 557

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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