

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
Department of Developmental Services

HEALTH IDENTIFIERS & SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS

DYSPHAGIA - Swallowing Difficulties

Dysphagia refers to any problem with swallowing food or liquids. It can cause food or liquid to enter the lungs (aspiration). This can cause coughing or even pneumonia. Dysphagia is also called a swallowing disorder or difficulty swallowing.



SOME FACTS about DYSPHAGIA

- Dysphagia can be commonly seen in people with mental retardation, especially as they age or increase the number of medications they take.
- A person with mental retardation might not be able to tell someone they have a swallowing disorder. However there are many signs and symptoms that indicate a person may have dysphagia.
- Properly managing dysphasia can decrease the risk of aspiration (food or liquid going into the lungs) and prevent the need for emergency interventions.



SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

There are many different signs and symptoms for dysphagia. Most of them can be observed during and after mealtime, and include:

- **Coughing** before or after swallowing
- **Trouble chewing** and swallowing certain types of food or liquids
- **Pocketing food** inside the cheek
- **Choking** on certain foods
- **Gagging** during a meal
- **Crying** or face **turning red** during a meal
- **Drooling**-especially during meals
- **Throat clearing** frequently during and/or after a meal
- **Hoarse throat** during and after a meal
- **Refusal to eat** certain foods
- Unexplained **weight loss**
- Meals takes a very **long time**



CAUSES

- **Medical conditions** such as
 - Seizures
 - Cerebral palsy
 - Stroke
 - Neurological damage
 - Decreased feeling in the mouth
- **Aging**
- **Side-effect of Medications:** can lead to weaker swallowing and chewing muscles
- **Incorrect posture while eating**
- **Fatigue and disorientation**
- **Missing teeth**
- **Eating too quickly**



PREVENTION

Carefully follow any special meal preparation and/or eating procedures!

In addition pay attention to:

- **Diet.** Prepare foods that can easily be chewed and swallowed. The doctor or therapist might suggest certain foods and fluids that will be easier to eat.
- **Mealtime.** Encourage eating slowly and do not do other activities while eating. The person should be calm and alert, not tired or anxious when eating.
- **Position.** Help maintain proper eating position: Sitting upright with the help of supports if needed and NOT lying down for at least 30 minutes after a meal.
- **Observe person during meal :** Encourage them to follow the above recommendations.



WHAT TO DO

- **CAREFULLY follow any special diet** prescribed by the doctor or dietitian.
- **CAREFULLY follow any special food preparation or eating procedure** – never take shortcuts.
- **Weigh weekly** to help ensure adequate food and fluid intake.
- Make sure you are trained in giving **emergency first aid for choking (Heimlich Maneuver)**.
- **Check with doctor or nurse if person has trouble swallowing any medications.**



CALL THE DOCTOR

Call the doctor or the nurse if :

- There is difficulty breathing or swallowing
- It takes more than 30 minutes to finish a meal
- Some foods cause coughing
- Choking on food occurs a lot
- The diet is restricted because some foods are too hard to eat.
- Losing weight unintentionally
- The person often is refusing foods and/or liquids

WHAT NOT TO DO

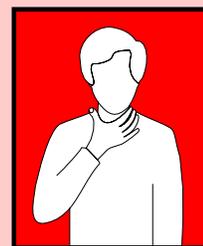
- **DO NOT** give foods or liquids that they have difficulty swallowing or that are restricted by the health care provider.
- **DO NOT** rush mealtimes.
- **DO NOT** start mealtime if angry, anxious, or can't sit still.
- **DO NOT** plan other activities during mealtimes.
- **DO NOT** permit eating or drinking lying down.
- **DO NOT** have lie down for 30 minutes after eating or drinking.
- **DO NOT** let finish a meal if the meal causes choking.



EMERGENCY

If you observe choking and any of the following signs call 911 immediately and perform the Heimlich Maneuver. Don't delay!

- **Turn blue**
- **Can't talk or make a sound**
- **Have difficulty breathing**
- **Become unconscious**
- **Feel very ill**



DOCUMENT

- File an Incident Report (if required) and write down a description in the logbook if there is a serious choking incident.
- Write down which foods or liquids the person has a hard time eating or drinking, and how often this occurs.
- Make sure all support providers have a list of these foods and liquids. Also, make sure the person has this list when he/she visits the doctor or therapist.



TO LEARN MORE – Go to these websites:

- http://www.ninds.nih.gov/health_and_medical/disorders/swallowing_disorders.htm
- <http://www.webMD.com>