

Chewing and Swallowing

Care tips for chewing and swallowing difficulties

Chewing and swallowing problems (also called dysphagia) can be dangerous to your health. The muscles of the mouth and throat may no longer be working properly so bits of food and liquid can move into the lungs (aspiration).

This may occur for many reasons including medical conditions, age, distractions, eating patterns and dentition. Whatever the reason it can cause infections and illness and should be assessed by your health care team.

If you are experiencing dysphagia it is recommended you are seen by a Speech and Language Therapist for a full assessment – your doctor can refer you. However there are also things you can do immediately:

Ask yourself:

If you find you are coughing or choking regularly when eating and you are getting worried, ask the following questions as they may identify the problem:

- What type of food or fluid were you eating when the choking occurred?
- If you wear dentures, were they in at the time?
- Were you walking around with food in your mouth?
- Were you laughing or talking while eating?

Care tips

You may find the following tips make eating and drinking easier:

- Ensure that foods are neither too hot nor too cold.
- Eat attractive, tasty, pleasant-smelling foods to enhance your appetite.
- Try finger foods – these are easy to manage without utensils.
- Make sure you are ready to eat i.e. your dentures, eyeglasses and hearing aids are in place.
- When you are distracted, you are more prone to coughing and choking, so try to make the eating environment quiet and inviting with as few distractions as possible. Try playing some quiet music.
- Make sure you are seated correctly (upright and at a table if possible).
- Avoid over filling your mouth – using a teaspoon rather than a fork will help.
- Remember to chew each mouthful thoroughly.
- Clean out your mouth after each meal using a toothbrush or mouth sponge to clean teeth/ dentures, gums and tongue, then rinse with water or mouthwash.



- Take as much time as necessary to eat and enjoy the meal – don't feel pressured.
- Remain sitting in an upright position for at least 30 minutes after each meal.



NOTE: If you have problems swallowing ask your GP to refer you to a Speech and Language Therapist. If you are taking thickened fluids, all fluids need to be thickened as directed by your Speech and Language Therapist.