



Beacon Hospital

DEPARTMENT OF SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is the medical term for any difficulty eating, drinking or swallowing.

Dysphagia occurs when there's a problem moving food or drinks safely and efficiently from the mouth, through the throat, into the oesophagus, and finally, into the stomach. Some people with dysphagia may experience a slight discomfort when swallowing while others experience a complete inability to swallow.

What are the Symptoms of Dysphagia?

Coughing or choking when eating or drinking is a common sign of dysphagia. Coughing indicates that food or drinks are “going down the wrong way” into the trachea or airway. This is termed *aspiration*.

Other symptoms of a swallowing problem include:

- Food catching against your breath
- Food getting stuck in the throat
- Wet gurgly voice quality during meals
- Difficulty completing meals
- Difficulty chewing food
- Food ‘sticking’ in the mouth or throat
- Food or drinks going up into the nose
- Food or drinks regurgitating or coming back up into the throat
- Drooling of food or drinks from mouth
- Holding of food in mouth without swallowing
- Avoiding specific foods

What Causes Dysphagia?

Some conditions which can lead to dysphagia are listed below. However, difficulty swallowing has multiple potential causes.

- Stroke
- Dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's Disease)
- Parkinson's disease

- Motor neuron disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Head and neck cancer
- Oesophageal cancer
- Gastroenterological conditions (e.g. reflux disease)
- Respiratory disease (e.g. COPD/lung cancer)
- Intubation/Tracheostomy tube

What Problems can Dysphagia Lead To?

Dysphagia can lead to chest infections or *aspiration pneumonia*. This is due to food or drinks collecting in the lungs when they enter the airway. Dysphagia can also lead to weight loss, dehydration and malnutrition.

How Do you Assess Dysphagia?

If you are having difficulty swallowing, you need to be referred to a speech and language therapist (SLT) who is trained to work with swallowing disorders. The SLT will work alongside medical staff, nursing staff, nutrition & dietetics and other members of the multidisciplinary team to best manage the swallowing problem.

The SLT will carry out a clinical examination of swallowing to determine the nature, cause and severity of any difficulty swallowing. In some cases, SLT will conduct an instrumental examination of swallowing. One of these examinations is called a *videofluoroscopy*, which is a moving x-ray of the swallow.

How is Dysphagia Treated?

Treatment of dysphagia depends on the cause and the nature of the swallowing problem (i.e. is it progressive or acute). The aim of treatment would be to ensure swallowing is safe and efficient for eating and drinking. Treatment options include:

- Compensation strategies (e.g. changing head posture during swallow)
- Sensory stimulation (to improve the speed of the swallow reflex)
- Treatment to strengthen muscles involved in swallowing
- Diet modification
- Surgical intervention

Tips to make Swallowing Safe

Sit upright & alert for meals
 Avoid dry crumbly foods
 Cut up meat and add sauces
 Avoid mixed consistencies (e.g. cereal)
 Stop eating or drinking if coughing

Eat slowly
 Take small sips of drinks
 Don't talk while eating
 Take tablets with yoghurt

If you require a swallow assessment, please contact Speech and Language Therapy in Beacon Hospital on (01) 293 6692