

What is dysphagia?

This advice sheet gives you some general information on swallowing. For more detailed advice please ask the speech and language therapist or registered Dietitian.

Dysphagia is defined as difficulty or discomfort in swallowing. It can occur for a variety of reasons, and to people of different ages.

Dysphagia can occur in varying degrees, ranging from mild discomfort or difficulty, to complete inability to swallow.

Symptoms of dysphagia include:

- repeated chest infections
- chesty cough
- weight loss
- patient reporting that food/drink has gone 'down the wrong way'
- inability to clear/swallow own saliva
- reports of food 'sticking' in the mouth or throat
- food getting stuck between the gum and the cheek
- food residue on the tongue and the roof of the mouth after swallowing
- coughing or clearing the throat before, during or after swallowing
- choking
- effortful swallowing
- wet/gurgly voice after swallowing food/fluid
- breathlessness after swallowing
- change in facial colour/rise in temperature after swallowing

What can happen?

Dysphagia can result in decreased food and fluid intake, longer time spent eating meals and less enjoyment of eating and drinking.

Dysphagia can also result in food or drink going the wrong way into the airway, past the vocal chords and going into the lungs.

For some people this can cause a chest infection called "aspiration pneumonia". Other possible problems are reduced oral intake, dehydration, weight loss and airway obstruction (choking).

Speech and Language Therapists work to ensure that patients with swallowing difficulties can eat and drink safely. Safe swallowing is extremely important to prevent medical problems such as chest infections, weight loss and dehydration.

Children who have difficulties with swallowing will be assessed by a Speech and Language Therapist to see what consistency of food and fluid can be tolerated most safely.

The Speech and Language therapist's recommendations must be followed in order to prevent further medical problems.