



Dysphagia

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia is another word for a swallowing disorder. A person with dysphagia may experience difficulty swallowing food, liquid and/or saliva. Some people may be unable to swallow at all. Dysphagia occurs when there is a problem with any part of the swallowing process.

How do we swallow?

Food or liquid is moved around in the mouth, mixed with saliva and formed into a cohesive mass (bolus). The bolus is moved back through the mouth with a front-to-back squeezing action performed by the tongue. The bolus enters the throat, triggering a swallow response. Once the response is triggered, breathing momentarily stops, and the airway is closed to prevent food or liquid from passing into the lungs. The bolus enters the esophagus (food tube) and is moved to the stomach by a squeezing action of the muscles.

Who is at risk for dysphagia?

Dysphagia is a common problem that affects people for a variety of reasons. Any condition, treatment or surgery that weakens or damages the muscles and nerves used for swallowing may cause dysphagia, such as:

- Stroke
- Aging
- TIA (Mini-stroke)
- Side effects of certain medications
- Xerostomia (dry mouth)
- Parkinson's disease
- Injury or surgery to the neck or spine
- Head injury
- Cleft palate
- Head and neck cancer
- Acid reflux
- Alzheimer's or other types of dementia
- Multiple Sclerosis

What are some symptoms of dysphagia?

- Coughing/Choking during or after eating or drinking
- Wet, gurgly voice quality after eating or drinking
- Frequent throat clearing during eating or drinking
- Excessive drooling
- Difficulty starting a swallow
- Swallowing multiple times to get food down.
- Difficulty clearing food from the mouth or throat after swallowing.
- Sensation of food sticking in the throat or chest
- Heartburn or chest pain
- Regurgitation

What are some problems caused by dysphagia?

Dysphagia can be serious for a number of reasons. Some of the most common complications of swallowing problems are:

- Pneumonia or other respiratory problems
- Choking or airway obstruction
- Malnutrition
- Dehydration
- Weight loss
- Oral yeast infection (thrush/candida)
- Dental cavities