

SWALLOWING DISORDERS

Information Sheet

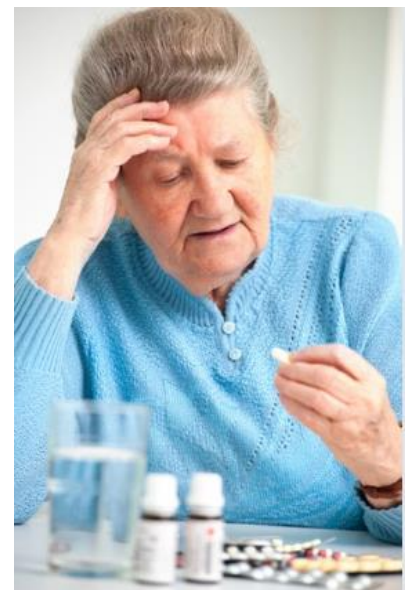
What is a swallowing disorder?

A swallowing disorder, also known as *dysphagia*, is a term used to describe difficulties eating, drinking and swallowing. An individual may have difficulties swallowing food, drinks or even their saliva. Difficulties may be temporary or permanent depending on their cause.

What can cause a swallowing disorder?

There are many causes of swallowing problems. Common causes include:

- Neurological illness such as Stroke, brain injury, Parkinson's disease and dementia
- Head and neck cancer and its treatment i.e. surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy
- Respiratory illness such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), chest infections and pneumonia
- Gastrointestinal illness such as oesophageal cancer and disorders of the oesophagus e.g. strictures, dysmotility, achalasia and reflux
- Acute infections e.g. sepsis or urinary tract infections
- Anatomical or structural abnormalities such as: diverticulum (pouches) and cervical osteophytes



The Stages of Swallowing:

Difficulties swallowing can be examined by looking at the different stages in the swallowing process:

1. The oral (mouth) stage
2. The pharyngeal (throat) stage
3. The oesophageal (gullet) stage

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The Oral Stage:

The oral stage involves the lips, teeth, mouth and tongue, and how the food or liquid is manipulated and transported back through the mouth to the pharynx (throat). Signs and symptoms of an oral stage dysphagia (swallowing problem) may include:

- Drooling and difficulties with food or drink escaping from the mouth or nose
- Difficulties biting, chewing and preparing food or drink in the mouth.
- Moving the food or drink from the front of the mouth back to the pharynx.

The Pharyngeal Stage:

The pharyngeal stage involves the safe and efficient transit of the swallowed food and drink through the throat into the oesophagus (gullet) without the swallowed material being misdirected into the airway. Signs and symptoms of a pharyngeal stage dysphagia may include:

- Coughing and spluttering
- Choking
- Sensation of food or drink sticking in the throat after swallowing
- Regurgitation of food and liquid back up into the mouth

The Oesophageal Stage:

The oesophageal stage refers to the transit of swallowed material down through the oesophagus into the stomach. Signs and symptoms of an oesophageal stage dysphagia may include:

- Sensation of food and or liquid being held up in the throat or chest
- Regurgitation of undigested food
- Pain on swallowing
- Reflux or heartburn

What are the complications associated with swallowing disorders?

Swallowing problems can significantly impact on a person's quality of life. However, there can also be serious health complications that can arise from dysphagia which include:

- Malnutrition and dehydration
- Weight loss
- Aspiration pneumonia
- Choking

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Why is Swallowing Therapy useful?

Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) have an expert knowledge about the complexities of oral and pharyngeal swallow. This allows them to assess and diagnose swallowing problems and create treatment plans that meets your needs.

For disorders of the oesophagus you should be referred to a gastroenterologist. However, due to SLTs specialist knowledge and understanding of how the individual stages of swallowing interact with each other, if present, they are likely to be able to help identify any potential oesophageal influences on your oral-pharyngeal swallow function. This can aid more efficient referral to gastroenterology.

An SLT will help educate you, your family or carers about your swallowing problems and the risks associated with any difficulties you may be having. They will work with you to ensure that you are provided with practical advice to help reduce these risks whilst maintaining your optimum quality of life.

What will happen at my initial consultation?

At your initial consultation a comprehensive case history will be taken. This will include a review of your medical history, any active medical problems and any regular medications you take. There will be a discussion about how your swallowing problems started and if you have any medical or lifestyle factors which might be exacerbating your symptoms.

Baseline assessments will be completed including an examination of your mouth and teeth, and the movements of the muscles responsible for swallowing in your mouth and throat. These assessments are not invasive and will be followed by an observation of you eating and drinking a range of textures in order to assess your functional eating, drinking and swallowing abilities.

You will be provided with immediate education and advice and we will agree your care plan and treatment together.

You may require referral for additional investigations such as a Videofluoroscopy. Videofluoroscopy is a video x-ray of your swallowing which allows me to assess the anatomy and physiology of your swallow and provide evidenced based swallowing strategies, compensatory advice and therapeutic exercises where appropriate.

What will happen in swallowing therapy?

If individual swallowing therapy is recommended, the number of therapy sessions you require will depend on the cause of your swallowing problem, and the severity and any contributing medical problems. However most importantly your progress will be influenced by your commitment to daily practice of any swallowing therapy exercises outside of our sessions.

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