

Swallowing Tips

Swallowing food or liquids may become more difficult when a person begins to have difficulties with movement. In progressive disorders such as Alzheimer's disease that affect memory and language first and movement much later, the swallowing difficulties typically occur much later. In progressive disorders such as Lewy body disease, PSP (progressive supranuclear palsy), and other parkinsonism plus diseases that affect movement first and memory and language much later, the swallowing difficulties typically occur earlier. People who have multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, have had a stroke, or had an illness or injury that affected the head, neck or spine may have swallowing difficulties.

Swallowing difficulties may lead to choking on saliva, foods, or liquids which leak into the windpipe (the trachea) through which air enters and leaves the lungs. Signs of a swallowing disorder include:

- ◆ Wet or gurgly sound in the voice or lungs
- ◆ Pieces of food getting caught in the mouth or throat
- ◆ Taking longer and working harder to chew and swallow
- ◆ Choking or coughing when eating food or drinking liquids

As a result of swallowing difficulties, pneumonia may develop. People may become less willing to eat or drink, especially foods that lead to choking.

Dysphagia

Dysphagia is the medical term for difficulty swallowing. Health specialists who can evaluate and recommend treatments for swallowing difficulties include physicians, ENT (Ear, Nose, Throat) specialists (physicians), and speech pathologists. A full medical evaluation may find a problem that is easy to fix or may benefit from treatment.

Swallowing Helps

The following steps may help people who have difficulty swallowing:

1. Bite a small amount of food,
2. Chew the food,
3. Swallow the chewed food,
4. Cough,
5. Swallow, and then take the next small bite of food.

Other helps:

- ◆ Sit up straight when eating and drinking and stay upright for 30 minutes afterwards
- ◆ It may help to bend the chin down a little when swallowing
- ◆ Foods that easy to chew and swallow: stews and thick soups with small pieces of meat and vegetables; custard; applesauce; yogurt

Hard to Swallow

Some foods are hard to chew and swallow. Dry food such as crackers, potato chips, taco shells, dry cookies, cake, raw carrots, hard candy, and the skins of foods such as apple or peach skins can get caught in the throat. Foods that are round or tiny such as peas, small beans, peanuts, or rice do well in a sauce such as a cream or cheese sauce that hold pieces together for better chewing and swallowing. Slippery foods, such as long strands of spaghetti, should be cut up and put in a sauce to make it easier to bite, chew, and swallow.

What about liquids?

Thin liquids are harder for the throat muscles to swallow than thick liquids. Thus, water, apple juice, or cranberry juice are harder to swallow. Bubbly soft drinks often are hard to swallow. Tomato juice, apricot juice, pulp-free orange juice, and milkshakes are easier to swallow.

Eating and drinking slowly and having few distractions at mealtime can help keep eating enjoyable and safe.

Web sites with more information

- ◆ www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/Pages/dysph.aspx (from the National Institutes of Health)
- ◆ www.nidcd.nih.gov/disorders/swallowing_disorders/swallowing... (from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke)
- ◆ www.espanol.ninds.nih.gov/trastornos/... (in Spanish from the National Institutes of Health)
- ◆ www.asha.org/public/swallowing/endoscopy.htm (from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association)