

Greenwich Hospital

What is Dysphagia?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia (dis-FA-je-uh) is difficulty with eating characterized by difficulty with chewing foods and swallowing solids and/or liquids, coughing or choking when eating, food sticking in the throat or chest, or difficulty swallowing saliva. This makes eating and taking in enough nutrients a challenge.

What causes dysphagia?

Dysphagia may be associated with many medical conditions. It is caused by any condition that affects the muscles and nerves used for swallowing. Diseases of the nervous system, such as Parkinson's disease and Cerebral Palsy, cancer, dementia, and spinal cord injury are some causes of dysphagia. Dysphagia is often found in patients who have suffered a stroke or head injury because the swallowing muscles and sensations in the mouth and throat have been affected.

What are the symptoms of dysphagia?

- Pocketing of food in the cheek
- Extra effort needed to chew/swallow
- Choking or coughing while eating or right after meal
- Sensation of food sticking in throat
- Bringing food or stomach acid back up (regurgitation)
- Inability to eat specific types of food
- Drooling
- Wet or gurgled voice while eating or right after meal
- Inability to swallow

How is dysphagia diagnosed?

Your doctor may refer you to a speech-language pathologist to evaluate any deficits you may have swallowing, eating, and speaking

This assessment starts with taking a thorough history of signs, symptoms and medical condition. Typically a clinical evaluation examines the oromotor mechanism (mouth structures) and may involve trials with solids or liquids. The speech-language pathologist will assess for signs and symptoms of dysphagia.

The function and structure of the mouth, throat, and sometimes the esophagus may be more carefully examined during a Modified Barium Swallow if the patient's physician and speech-language pathologist find it necessary. A Modified Barium Swallow entails swallowing a variety of solids and liquids coated in barium so they may be visualized on an x-ray. Problem areas can be examined and identified and the best diet for the patient can be determined.

Are there any complications with dysphagia?

If a swallowing problem remains untreated, the patient can become dehydrated or malnourished because of the inability to swallow liquids or solids. Aspiration, food or liquids getting into the lungs while swallowing, may also occur. Pneumonia may result from aspiration. The patient may also have increased secretions as the lungs clean themselves of food or liquid.

How is dysphagia treated?

Depending on the cause of the problem, any of the following may be used to correct or improve the condition: Dysphagia therapy, medical intervention, surgical intervention, dietary modifications.

- If dysphagia therapy is warranted, treatment varies depending on the cause, symptoms, and type of swallowing problem. Therapy may include exercises, changes in head and body position, teaching strategies to improve safety, or heightening sensation of food.
- Medical intervention may include use of medications or dilation of a narrowed area.
- Surgical interventions may include removal of tumors and relaxing or tightening muscles to improve the function of the swallow.
- Dietary modifications may include modifying the consistency of food so it is easier to chew or swallow. Modify the consistency of liquids so that they can be swallowed easily and safely.
- For severe dysphagia that prevents the patient from being able to eat or drink, your doctor may suggest the placement of a feeding tube to bypass the esophagus. This may decrease the risk of aspiration and provide a way to maintain sufficient nutrition and hydration.

Where can I get more information?

For more information regarding dysphagia, ask to speak with your stroke team doctor, nurse or speech-language pathologist. You may also obtain additional information from:

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| • American Speech-Language-Hearing Association | (800)638-8255 | www.asha.org |
| • National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders | (800)241-1044 | www.nidcd.nih.gov |
| • National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases | (301)496-3583 | www.niddk.nih.gov |
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Sources: Mayo Clinic @ www.mayoclinic.com Retrieved 9/05.

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders @ www.nidcd.nih.gov Retrieved 9/05.

For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and Click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education 9/05