

Feeding and Swallowing Difficulties

Feeding and swallowing difficulties are called dysphagia (dis-FAY-juh).

Dysphagia is more common than you think.

- As many as 60% of people living in long-term care have a swallowing disorder.
- As many as 45% of typically developing children have feeding or swallowing problems (SAC, n.d.).

Dysphagia may occur with:

- disease or injury involving the brain or nervous system (e.g., stroke, spinal cord injury, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Parkinson's disease);
- delayed or disordered development (e.g., cerebral palsy, autism); and
- structural or mechanical changes to the face, jaw, mouth, tongue and/or neck (e.g., related to cancer, surgery, aging).

Problems may include difficulty with feeding, eating, drinking or taking medications such as:

- frequent choking, coughing or gagging
- pocketing of food in the mouth after swallows
- trouble chewing
- effortful or painful swallowing
- food or liquid spilling from the mouth or nose; drooling
- feeling as though food is stuck in the throat
- regurgitation or vomiting
- gurgling voice after swallowing
- congested chest, lots of phlegm, recurring chest infections
- unintentional weight loss or poor weight gain
- poor food and liquid intake
- failure to progress diet textures (e.g., from pureed to more solid food consistencies)
- difficulty accepting or tolerating food
- lack of enjoyment in eating

Risks associated with swallowing problems include:

- food or liquid entering the lungs (aspiration)
- blockage of the airway (obstruction or choking)
- malnutrition
- dehydration
- chest infections, development of chronic lung conditions and/or aspiration pneumonia
- impaired growth
- impaired development
- patient, family and/or caregiver stress
- social difficulties or isolation



Assessment and Treatment

Assessments may be conducted by an interdisciplinary assessment team which may include a(n):

- Registered Speech-language Pathologist;
- Registered Occupational Therapist; and/or
- Registered Dietitian.

Team members work closely with physicians, nurses, psychologists and social workers. Referrals are made to medical specialists as needed.

Assessment teams typically do the following:

- Assess the difficulty with feeding and swallowing; and
- provide counseling, education, treatment recommendations and follow up to:
 - maximize safety and adequacy of nutrition and hydration
 - promote independence and/or improved self-feeding.

Information Gathered From:

Speech Language Pathology and Audiology Canada (SAC). (n.d.) Dysphagia.

April 2014
Revised July 2018

Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist (R.SLP). To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTH LINK - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Enquire at a Public Health Centre
- Find a private practice SLP:
 - Search the Yellow Pages
 - Contact the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) website at www.asapp.ca.

