

Feeding and Swallowing Difficulties

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

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)
- Structural or mechanical changes to the face, jaw, mouth, tongue, 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

Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist (R.SLP). No referral is necessary. To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTHLink Alberta - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Inquire at a Public Health Centre
- Find a private practice speech-language pathologist by checking your local Yellow Pages listing under Speech Therapy or Speech-Language Pathology, or by visiting the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) website at www.asapp.ca.



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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
- 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

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