

# Dysphagia (swallowing problems)

## Speech and Language Therapy Department Patient Information Leaflet

### Introduction

This leaflet is for people who have dysphagia. It gives information on what this condition is and what can be done to help it.

### What is dysphagia?

This is a medical term used to describe difficulties with eating, drinking and swallowing.

Swallowing difficulties can result in food and drink going into the lungs. This is known medically as aspiration. This can result in a serious chest infection (pneumonia)

## How is it caused?

These difficulties can arise from a number of medical conditions such as:

- A stroke.
- Head injury.
- Dementia.
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Cancer, for example, of the mouth or the oesophagus (food pipe).
- Neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease.

However, it is most commonly seen after a stroke or head injury, and in people with dementia.

It is important that dysphagia is identified and treated promptly to help prevent the development of a chest infection and the complications that may come with this.

## What are the symptoms?

Some people with dysphagia have problems swallowing certain foods or liquids, while others cannot swallow at all.

Other signs of dysphagia include:

- Coughing or choking when eating or drinking.
- Bringing food back up, sometimes through the nose.
- A sensation that food is stuck in your throat or chest.
- Persistent drooling of saliva.

Over time, dysphagia can also cause symptoms such as weight loss and repeated chest infections.

## How is it treated?

### Changing the foods and drinks you eat:

It may be necessary to make the fluids you drink thicker using a starch based thickening powder. This makes the drinks easier to control and, therefore, reduces the risk of them going into the lungs.

You can eat softer or pureed food so that you can swallow it easier. This reduces the risk of choking and the build-up of food in the mouth.

Please speak to the speech therapist about specific recommendations for you.

### Not eating:

In some cases, you or your relative/friend may not be safe to swallow **any** food or drink due to the risk of it going into the lungs. In this instance, you or your relative/friend may not be able to eat anything. This is known medically as nil by mouth.

To ensure you or your relative/friend receives adequate nutrition, you may have a nasogastric tube placed through your nose into the stomach. This does not affect how you swallow so you can eat and drink with the tube in place when it is safe to do so.

### Speech and language therapy:

A speech and language therapist (SLT) will assess you or your relative/friend's abilities to eat, drink and swallow. Then they will provide advice and recommendations. They may suggest certain postures or swallowing techniques to help you or your relative/friend to eat, drink and swallow safely.

A dietitian may be involved to ensure you or your relative/friend is getting enough to eat and drink.

If necessary, nursing staff will be involved in helping to feed you or your relative/friend, following the SLT guidelines.

## How can I help my relative/friend?

Always follow any swallowing recommendations your relative/friend has been given or ask nursing staff before giving them anything to eat or drink.

If you are giving your relative/friend something to eat or drink:

- Make sure they are upright and alert.
- Do not use straws or spouted beakers (unless stated on the bed board).
- If they cough when eating or drinking, please **stop and tell nursing staff**.

## What happens when I leave hospital?

People sometimes need to eat or drink special food and fluids when they go home. If necessary, the SLT will refer you or your relative/friend to the Community SLT Team for ongoing support. If you have any questions, please ask on the ward to speak with a speech and language therapist.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

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**This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:**

<http://dgft.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/speech-and-language-therapy/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet, please email [dgft.patient.information@nhs.net](mailto:dgft.patient.information@nhs.net)

**This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.**

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此宣传单可提供大字版本、音频版本和其它语言版本，请拨打电话：0800 073 0510。

Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

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Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru va rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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