

Eating, Chewing and Swallowing Problems



Family Version



**Office of Health Services
Therapeutic Services**

Difficulty at mealtimes is a common problem.

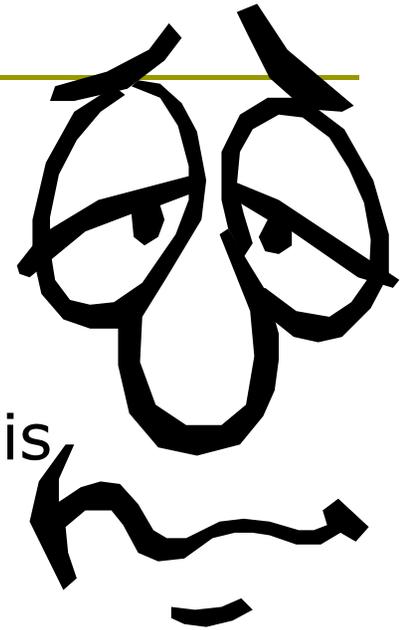
- There can be several different causes:
 - ~ difficulty chewing
 - ~ difficulty swallowing
 - ~ problems in the esophagus (food tube)
 - ~ eating or drinking too rapidly or with too large a bite
 - ~ certain behaviors surrounding mealtimes

These things may cause choking or inhalation of food or liquid into the lungs

Swallowing Disorders

The term for a swallowing disorder is

DYSPHAGIA



You may hear your doctor or therapist use this word

What might cause my loved one to have difficulty with eating or drinking?

There may be physical reasons:

- ❑ Some folks have weak muscles of the tongue, lips, and cheeks:
 - ~ **this makes it difficult to chew the food well enough to get it ready to swallow safely**
- ❑ Some people may have weak or slow muscles in the throat:
 - ~ **this makes it difficult to keep food from going into the lungs**
- ❑ Some people may have difficulty passing the food into the stomach:
 - ~ **this may cause food or liquid to come back up the wrong way, get stuck, or not be able to pass into the stomach**
- ❑ If someone has a weak cough reflex they can't protect things from "going down the wrong pipe" into the lungs

More Reasons for Difficulty

- ❑ Eating or drinking too fast or too much at one time is very common and can be dangerous
- ❑ Many folks must depend on someone else to assist by placing food and drink in their mouth
- ❑ Some medications, dental issues, and some mental health issues may effect mealtime safety
- ❑ Some people have difficulty processing too much sensory information at once which can cause difficulty during meals if it is a loud, bright, busy environment

WHY Is This Important To Me?

- ❑ If someone you care for has mealtime issues, you may be responsible for helping to keep them safe.
- ❑ It's very important to take the time to understand what is happening with your loved one at mealtimes so that you can make informed and wise decisions.
- ❑ Understanding WHY certain things are recommended provides us with the knowledge to help advocate for those we care about.
- ❑ You will be able to consult with physicians, therapists, and agencies regarding the needs of your loved one and will understand the terminology they are using.
- ❑ You will understand why it's so important to follow the recommendations agreed upon such as texture and portion size.

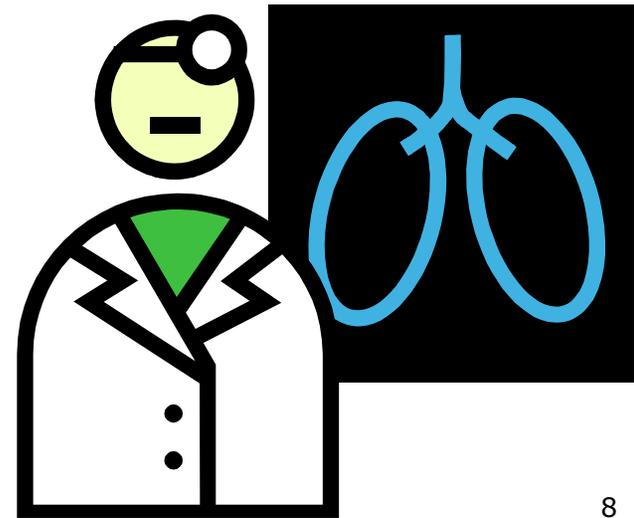
Swallowing problems and mealtime issues are a very real safety concern



- Caregiver knowledge and training is a critical factor in preventing serious illnesses, hospitalizations, pneumonia, respiratory complications, choking and the need for Heimlich Maneuvers.

Swallowing Problems Can Cause Serious Respiratory Complications

Respiratory complications can lead to serious illnesses and even possibly to death.

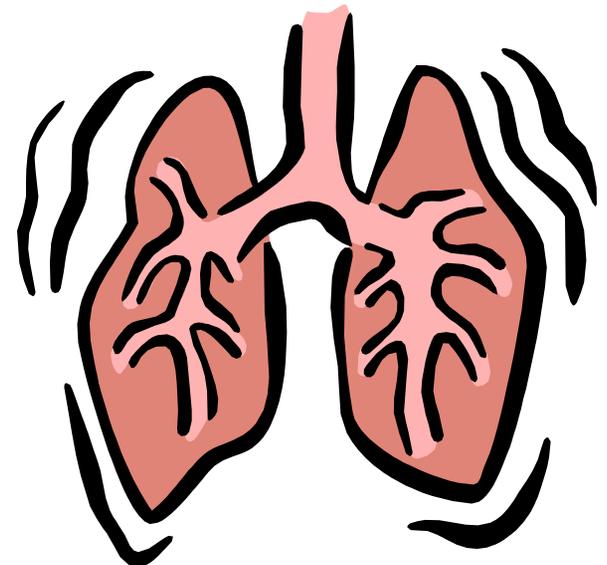


Mealtime Difficulty may Cause Aspiration

WHAT IS ASPIRATION?

- ❑ Aspiration is the ingestion of food, liquid, saliva or other material into the lungs

This can be a problem and can cause serious respiratory complications and can make your loved one very sick



What else may occur??

- ❑ Repeated trace amounts of aspiration over a long period of time can cause serious respiratory complications and permanent damage to the lungs
- ❑ Food can totally block the airway causing asphyxiation (not able to breathe)



Assessment

- ❑ A swallowing or mealtime problem may occur in one or several different phases of a swallow.
- ❑ Very often it is necessary to have a therapist specializing in assessing swallowing issues assess the difficulty to determine what is the specific problem.



Swallowing is very complex!



LUCKILY...

There are some general aspiration precautions that may help prevent problems.

If these precautions aren't enough, there are specialists that are trained in swallowing disorders.

General Aspiration Precautions:

- ❑ Proper positioning of head and body
- ❑ Good oral hygiene
- ❑ Knowing the high risk choking foods
- ❑ Knowing the signs and symptoms of difficulty

LET'S LOOK AT EACH OF THESE:

POSITIONING IS IMPORTANT!

SITTING UPRIGHT AT A TABLE IS SAFEST FOR MOST PEOPLE:

- ❑ **Hips straight, level and to the back of the chair**
- ❑ **Supported arms and feet**
- ❑ **Head stays looking forward
nose, navel, knees and toes are in line to the best extent possible**



A clean mouth is critical !!!

- ❑ Brush teeth or clean the mouth after each meal (even people without teeth!)
- ❑ Bacteria builds in the mouth and can be aspirated into the lungs when the teeth and gums are not clean.
- ❑ Many folks can not undergo frequent dental cleanings, due to general anesthesia needs, so bacteria builds up.
- ❑ Food can pocket in the roof of the mouth and in the cheek area. This can cause a later choking event.

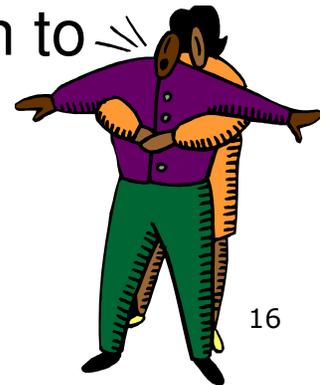


Help I'm choking!



Some families may feel it would be helpful to teach their loved one the universal sign for choking. However, if you feel the airway is blocked don't wait for a sign to initiate the proper assistance.

Learn the Heimlich Maneuver/abdominal thrust.



BE AWARE OF HIGH RISK CHOKING FOODS

- Bacon
- Breads
- Cubed meat
- Corn
- Dry Crackers
- Doughnuts
- Dried fruits
- Fried foods
- Granola
- Gummy candies
- Hard and sticky candy
- Hot dogs
- Ice cubes
- Marshmallows
- Nuts/seeds
- Peanut butter
- Popcorn
- Raisins
- Raw vegetables
- Refried beans
- Vienna sausages
- Whole grapes



Possible Signs and Symptoms of Chewing or Swallowing Difficulty

- ❑ Coughing or choking
- ❑ Wet/gurgling voice
- ❑ Frequent throat clearing
- ❑ Gagging
- ❑ Crying or unusual behaviors during meals
- ❑ Grimacing while eating
- ❑ Reddening of the face/sweating during meals
- ❑ Difficulty chewing/swallowing food before completely chewed
- ❑ Vomiting after meals
- ❑ Taking a very long time to eat
- ❑ Loss of food or liquid from the mouth
- ❑ Swallowing large amounts of food or drink rapidly
- ❑ Drooling
- ❑ Pocketing food or still having food in the mouth after meals

There are other behaviors that significantly increase the risk of choking

- ~ Eating non-edible objects
- ~ Hoarding foods for later consumption
- ~ Quickly grabbing food from plates or counters to eat



A therapist who specializes in swallowing difficulties

can determine the right food and liquid texture and thickness, proper positioning, mealtime strategies and possibly adaptive equipment that can make eating a safe and enjoyable experience.



Aspiration into the lungs may be silent:

- ❑ Sometimes aspiration is silent rather than showing obvious signs and symptoms

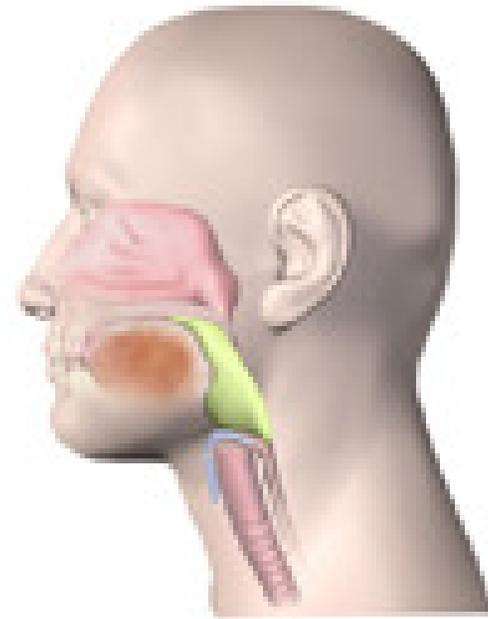
- ❑ When this happens you may see:
 - ~ Unexplained fevers
 - ~ Frequent respiratory illnesses
 - ~ Unexplained weight loss and refusal of foods
 - ~ Pneumonias

The Modified Barium Swallow

Sometimes the therapist may need more information to be able to make the best recommendations.

They may request an MBS or 'modified barium swallow' test

This test takes a moving video clip showing what is happening during the swallow. It can provide a lot of information to the therapist.



3D SCIENCE.COM

Courtesy: Jamie Stevens, MS/CCCC Inc. & S.I.P.s. inc

After the Evaluation

At the completion of an evaluation your therapist can then provide you with



MEALTIME INSTRUCTIONS

These recommendations are to help keep your loved one as safe as possible during meals. Following the food texture and consistency and liquid recommendations is very important.

CAN THIS AFFECT NUTRITION?

- Sometimes having difficulty with swallowing food or liquid can cause other problems as well.
- Chewing and swallowing problems can sometimes make it very difficult to get enough to eat. This can cause dehydration or weight loss which can make someone very sick.



Stay Ahead of the Curve!

Difficulty with mealtimes may increase with age.



TEAMWORK!

A strong team approach involving the family and all those who care about your loved one is important to developing the best mealtime strategies for safety and enjoyment.



Resources:

The Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities has three regional offices with therapeutic services staff who can assist:

- East TN Regional Office 865-588-0508
- Middle TN Regional Office 615-231-5424
- West TN Regional Office 901-745-7590

Other specialists who may assist you are

- Your ISC or Case Manager
- Speech and Language Pathologists (SLP)
- Occupational Therapists
- Dietitians