

How to help people who can't swallow properly

Dysphagia means it's hard to swallow properly. People with certain disabilities or illnesses are prone to dysphagia. It's also a side effect of some medications.

What does dysphagia look like?

People with dysphagia can:

- find it hard to bite, chew and swallow food
- cough or choke on food or drink
- have difficulty breathing while eating.

Symptoms can get worse as people get older.

When is dysphagia more likely to happen?

- At mealtimes when people are eating and drinking.
- On hot days when people do not have enough to drink.
- When someone is sick.

How to help people with dysphagia

Act in an emergency – if a person is choking, ring 000 immediately.

Look for and see a doctor, or ask the support worker for advice, if any of the below symptoms happen:

- coughing or throat clearing during or after a meal
- chewing less, taking a long time to chew or swallowing without chewing
- food being stuck in a person's mouth after a meal.

Check the person sees their doctor regularly to have their health and medication checked.

Make sure the person has enough to drink – people who do not have enough fluid in their body can find it hard to swallow.

Make mealtimes easier:

- Cut food into smaller pieces or encourage the person to cut their food up smaller.
- Change the type of food offered to soft and wet or pureed food (sometimes people can only eat thicker fluids).
- Use smaller utensils to slow down eating.
- Make sure the person's favourite drink or water is available.
- Follow advice from a speech therapist in a mealtime management plan, if the person has one.

Avoid offering foods that are harder to swallow like those:

- with a fibrous or 'stringy' texture like celery, green beans and melted cheese

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- with thick skins, seeds or pips like baked beans, grapes and tomatoes
- that are crunchy and crumbly like biscuits, crackers, crisps and pie crusts.

Learn choking first aid - see the fact sheet 'How to stop someone choking'.

Find out if dysphagia is a side effect of medications.

Look at labels on medications. If a side effect is 'dysphagia', 'difficulty swallowing' or 'may cause drowsiness' and the person is having symptoms of dysphagia, ask their doctor if they can prescribe a different medication.

Medications that can have dysphagia as a side effect include:

- antipsychotic medications
- antidepressants, antihistamines, and diuretics
- anti-epileptic drugs
- certain cancer medications.

Who is prone to dysphagia?

- People who have had a stroke or spinal cord injury
- People with conditions that damage the brain and nervous system such as Parkinson's disease, dementia, cerebral palsy and motor neurone disease
- People with autoimmune conditions like multiple sclerosis
- People with certain types of cancer like mouth or throat cancer
- People who are having radiotherapy treatment for cancer or other illnesses
- People with heartburn (feeling a burning sensation in the chest).

Who can help or support you?

- The person's support worker can provide information and advice.
- The person's doctor can change their medication and monitor their health.
- A speech pathologist can identify ways to help people eat and drink more easily.

More information

Help people understand their dysphagia by giving them:

- [Managing dysphagia – what you need to know – easy read fact sheet](#)
- [Medicines that cause swallowing problems: what you need to know – easy read.](#)

If you do not have internet access, the support worker can print these out for you.