

Living with Swallowing Problems

A Guide for People with Dysphagia



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**PATIENT
EDUCATION**

What is Dysphagia?

- Dysphagia is the medical term for swallowing problems. Swallowing is the process in which food and liquid move from the mouth through the throat and esophagus.
- You may have difficulty swallowing, or it may be uncomfortable or painful to swallow.
- Eating can become a challenge, and it can be difficult to take in enough calories and fluids to nourish the body.
- People with dysphagia commonly have problems with food and fluids getting into the lungs, causing aspiration pneumonia.

What is Aspiration?

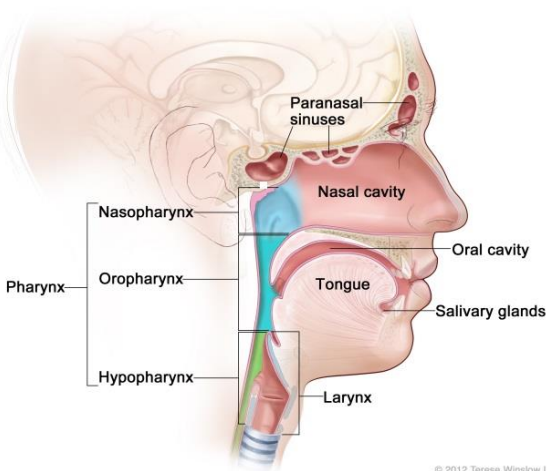
Aspiration is the presence of food or liquid in your airways, including your trachea and lungs.

Common Causes

- Tumor or cancer of any structure involved in the swallowing process
- Radiation therapy or surgery to the mouth or neck area including the tongue, neck, larynx, or esophagus
- Stroke or transient ischemic attacks (TIAs)
- Some neurological disorders
- Aging

Who Treats Dysphagia?

- **Speech-Language Pathologist:** treats patients who are experiencing problems with the oral and pharyngeal stages of the swallow (stages 1 and 2)
- **Gastroenterologist or GI Physician:** treats patients who are experiencing problems with the esophageal stage of the swallow (stage 3)
- **Registered Dietician (RD):** does not treat dysphagia but can provide information regarding adequate nutrition for patients who have dysphagia.

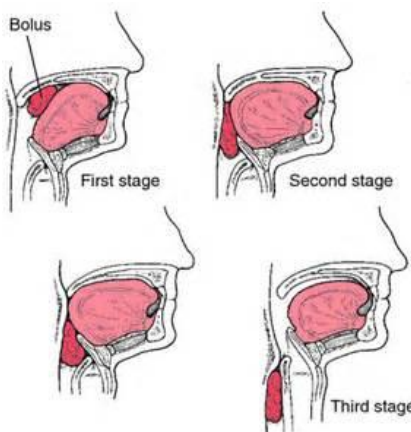


Signs & Symptoms of Aspiration and Swallowing Problems

Call your doctor immediately if you:

- cough or choke during or after meals, or cough up food
- spit out or 'pocket' food in your mouth

- consistently clear your throat while you are eating
- take a long time to begin a swallow, or need to swallow 3-4 times for each bite of food
- have a gurgling or wet-sounding voice during or after eating
- have reflux or regurgitation (stomach acid or contents move backward, up the esophagus)
- have chronic fevers and congestion
- have recurrent pneumonia or chronic respiratory distress
- have sudden or increasing weight loss
- drool or have excessive saliva, especially after meals
- are afraid to eat or afraid you will choke if you eat or drink
- have pain when you swallow or food catches in your throat
- have a feeling of fullness or tightness in your throat or chest



How Does Swallowing Work?

Stage 1 (oral): You receive food and liquid in your mouth and keep it there with a good lip seal. Your tongue moves food and liquids around in your mouth so that

the teeth can chew and grind it. Saliva softens and moistens the food.

Stage 2 (pharyngeal): The tongue collects food from around the mouth and forms it into a little ball called a bolus. The tongue pushes the bolus to the back of the mouth, where it triggers a swallow. The food and liquid move from the mouth down the throat (pharynx). During this stage, it is very important that your larynx closes tightly and breathing stops so that the food and liquids do not enter your airways.

Stage 3 (esophageal): Food and liquid enter the esophagus and travel through it to the stomach. Food is moved along by series of wave-like muscle contractions (peristaltic motion).

Diet Levels

The diet below has been recommended by your speech-language pathologist. Solids and liquids are swallowed differently, so there are separate recommendations for foods and liquids.

Food Consistencies

Regular: All foods are acceptable.

Dysphagia - Advanced Soft Diet

Requires adequate teeth and the ability to chew

Recommendations	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thin-sliced, tender meats• Well-moistened fish• Eggs prepared any way• Most fruits without seeds• Rice• Moist bread• All cooked, tender vegetables• Shredded lettuce	Avoid <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tough/dry meats & fish• Chunky peanut butter• Yogurt with nuts or coconut• High-pulp & dried fruits• Dry breads, crackers• Coarse or dry cereals or cookies• Raw vegetables• Chewy candies

Dysphagia - Mechanically Altered Diet

Recommendations	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most bread products• Plain crackers• Cold cereal with milk• Cake, soft cookies, pies• French toast, waffles, pancakes with syrup• Hardboiled/scrambled eggs• Ground hamburger• Ground or chopped chicken or turkey (pieces quarter inch or smaller)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foods may be ground, mashed, or chopped to a consistency easy to control in mouth; requires little-moderate chewing• Moistness is important. Gravies, sauces, and purees are recommended• All food should be soft and tender; meats can be chopped up or ground into quarter-inch pieces

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pot pies • Spaghetti with meat/tomato sauce • Soups, sandwiches • Bananas, diced peaches, chopped pears • Cottage cheese, sliced cheese • Oatmeal • Macaroni and cheese • Noodles, rice • Baked or mashed potato • Soft cooked vegetables • Soft casserole • Cheese stuffed shells • Strained cream soups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • or smaller • Vegetables should be well cooked and easy to chew • Includes anything from puree menu <p>Avoid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole-grain foods • Coarse, granular foods • Rubbery, sticky, dry, and chewy foods • Crackers, toast • Seeds, dried fruits, nuts • Bacon • Whole cuts of meat • Coconut and raw vegetables
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Dysphagia - Puree Diet

Requires no chewing

Recommendations	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All pureed fruits, • meats, breads, vegetables, and desserts • Applesauce • Mashed potatoes • Cream of Wheat • Plain yogurt • Puddings and custards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All solid foods should be pureed to a smooth, cohesive texture without lumps

Dysphagia – Puree Diet (cont.)

Avoid

- Foods with multiple consistencies including anything that is lumpy, pulpy, chunky, coarse, dry, crunchy, sticky, or chewy
- crackers
- cold cereal
- cookies
- seeds, nuts
- whole or dried fruits
- all meats that are not pureed
- all vegetables that are not pureed
- all breads that are not pureed
- raw eggs
- soup with pieces
- coconut
- peas, corn

Liquid Diets

Liquid Diets	Recommendations	Notes
Liquid Diet- Thin Liquids	All beverages are acceptable	Jell-O, ice cream, sorbet and ice pops are considered thin liquids

Liquid Diet - Nectar Thick Liquids	Consistency like syrup, tomato juice, or unset gelatin Easily pourable, coats and drips off spoon	Avoid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jell-O • Ice cream • Sorbet • Ice pops
Liquid Diet - Honey Thick Liquids	Consistency like honey Less pourable, drizzles from a cup or bowl in a ribbon	Avoid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jell-O • Ice cream • Sorbet • Ice pops
Liquid Diet - Pudding Thick Liquids	Consistency like pudding or yogurt Not pourable, usually eaten with a spoon Holds its shape Stays on spoon, “Plops” off spoon	Avoid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jell-O • ice cream • sorbet • ice pops

Everyone who is on a thickened liquid diet: Do not have anything thinner than the liquid consistency recommended. Most liquids can be thickened.

Guidelines for Safe Swallowing

Follow the guidelines below that have been recommended by your speech-language pathologist to ensure safety when swallowing.

- Sit up as straight as possible (or 90 degrees) using pillows for support if necessary.
- Eat and drink slowly.
- Small bites/sips.
- Use a regular teaspoon, and take no more than one-half to one teaspoon with liquids and/or food.
- Swallow _____ times after each sip/swallow.
- Swallow completely before you bite or sip again.
- Do not use a straw.
- Stay in an upright position for 15 to 30 minutes after your meal.
- Do not eat anything that melts (ice cream, ice cubes, gelatin, or sherbet) as this will melt into a thin liquid and could cause aspiration or choking.
- Do not add ice cubes to thickened liquids; when the ice melts, it will make the drink too thin.
- Avoid moist and juicy foods (oranges, pineapples, grapes, and watermelon).
- Cooked vegetables and canned fruit should be drained.
- Soups should be thickened to the recommended thickness.
- Avoid foods that may result in choking (nuts, popcorn, chips, raw vegetables).

- Avoid dry, stringy meats that are hard to chew, and add sauces and gravies to moisten dry foods.
- Avoid any foods that you know you are having difficulty with.

Swallowing Strategies

Specific Diet Instructions

Helpful Hints for Thickening Liquids

Exact directions for achieving the correct consistency will vary by thickener.

- Always measure both the liquid and thickener.
- Stir the measured liquid briskly with spoon or wire whisk and gradually add measured thickener.
- Allow plenty of extra room in glass/pitcher to stir briskly.
- Gel thickeners: shaking is most effective way to thicken.
- Let drink sit for at least 1-2 minutes. It will continue to thicken while standing.
- Too thick? Add thin liquids.
- Too thin? Add small amount of thickener.
- Do not under-thicken liquids, it is better to drink a liquid that is too thick than too thin.
- Some products may lump when thickening (heavy syrups, some nutritional supplements, etc.). Allow them to stand for 20 minutes after thickening, and then stir again briskly to dissolve lumps.
- When storing thickened liquids overnight, use a half teaspoon (per 4 ounce serving) less than the chart measurement.
- Hot drinks: As they cool off, they tend to get thicker.
- Carbonated drinks: You can thicken them but carbonation is lost when drink is stirred.
- To make thickened ice cubes: thicken water to the correct level of thickness and freeze it in ice cube trays. That way you can get the cooling and keep the level of thickness that is safe for your swallowing.

Talk to your Speech-Language Pathologist if you are still having swallowing problems. He or she may have some other suggestions for you.

Ask your dietitian if you have any questions regarding nutritional issues with your liquids.

Where Can I Buy Thickener Products?

- **At most local supermarkets and pharmacies. If you do not see it on the shelf, ask at the pharmacy counter.**
- **Directly from distributor or manufacturer.**
- **Online outlets such as [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and medical supply websites**

Note: pricing will vary between different commercial thickeners and between vendors.

Thick & Easy - Hormel Health Labs

Telephone order/home delivery: 888-617-3482

Available online at www.amazon.com

www.hormelhealthlabs.com/products/condition/dysphagia-swallowing-difficulties/

Thick-It - Precision/Milani Foods

800-333-0003

Available at most pharmacies and online at

<https://thickit.com/> and www.amazon.com

Simply Thick - Simply Thick, LLC

800-205-7115 (M-F, 7am -6pm CT)

Available online at: www.simplythick.com

Reflux Precautions

If you are experiencing heartburn or reflux symptoms, please try these recommendations and notify your physician.

- Eat several smaller meals a day, rather than larger ones.
- Eat slowly and don't overeat.
- Decrease/eliminate: spicy/acidic foods; fruit juices such as orange, grapefruit or cranberry; fried foods; caffeine; carbonated beverages; chocolate; peppermint; alcohol.
- Decrease dairy, red meat, or any food that gives you symptoms.
- Stay upright for at least a half hour to one hour after meals.
- Avoid bending over or exercising after eating.
- Avoid eating within 2-3 hours before bedtime, except for water.
- Elevate the head of the bed 6-8 inches with blocks or books (wedge under your mattress). Propping with pillows may cause neck or back pain.
- If you take medications at night, be sure to take them with a full glass of water.
- No tight or constricting clothing.
- Avoid smoking or exposing yourself to smoke.
- Avoid non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (ibuprofen, Aleve).
- Exercise regularly, reduce stress.
- Lose weight if you are overweight.
- Use antacids as directed by your physician.

Helpful Hints

- Chewing gum (non-mint) for 20 minutes after each meal may be helpful.
- Try drinking warm fluids with your meals which helps to clear the esophagus and decrease spasms.
- Slippery elm throat lozenges or herbal tea may help.
- Carrot juice

Useful Websites

- **Dysphagia (National Institutes on Deafness and Communication Disorders - NIDCD):**
www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/Pages/dysph.aspx
- **Swallowing Disorders (MedlinePlus):**
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/swallowingdisorders.html
- **Swallowing Disorders in Adults (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association)**
www.asha.org/public/speech/swallowing/swallowing-disorders-in-adults/
- **Swallowing Problems After Head and Neck Cancer**
www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/swallowing-problems-after-head-and-neck-cancer

For more information, call the Department of Head & Neck Surgery at **716-845-8186**. Ask to speak with a speech-language pathologist.