

Swallowing Problems after Stroke:



UHN

What You Need to Know and How to Help



Swallowing Difficulties After Stroke

A stroke can affect the muscles we use to eat and swallow and make it difficult to swallow. These muscles may include the lips, tongue, etc. Some swallowing problems may be obvious like drooling, coughing or choking but others may be harder to spot (e.g., feeling food stuck in the throat).

Watch for these Common Difficulties when Eating & Drinking After Stroke:

- Coughing, throat clearing or choking while eating and drinking
- Swallowing several times for each mouthful
- Complaints of food sticking in the throat when eating or drinking
- Holding food in the cheek or back of the mouth after swallowing—often on the person's weaker side
- Eating too quickly or too slowly
- Taking a long time to finish a meal

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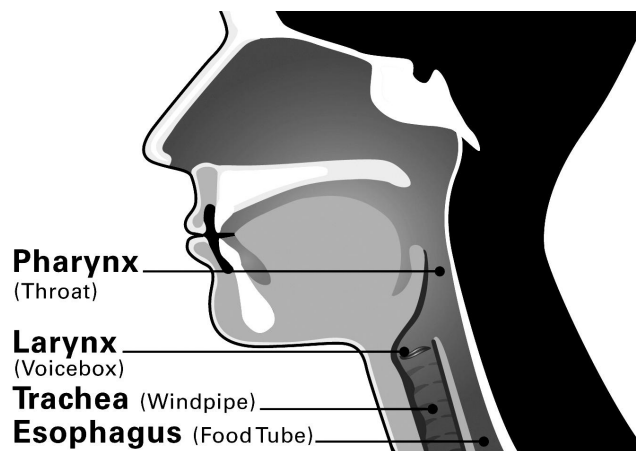
- Repeat pneumonias or chest infections
- Changes in the ability to eat independently
- Difficulty swallowing medications

Why are Swallowing Problems Dangerous?

If a person shows any signs of eating or swallowing difficulty, it is important for swallowing to be tested. Ask a healthcare provider for a swallowing assessment. A Speech-Language Pathologist can do this assessment.

When a person has a swallowing problem, there is a danger that food or drink may go down the wrong way into the breathing tube instead of the eating tube. This can sometimes cause a chest infection or pneumonia.

People with difficulty swallowing sometimes do not take in enough food or drink. This can cause weight loss or dehydration (thirst). Sometimes it is helpful to change the person's food or drink to make swallowing safer and easier for them.



Helping People with Swallowing Problems:

There are ways that families can help people with swallowing difficulties. **YOU** can:

- Ask the Speech-Language Pathologist to explain the feeding and swallowing recommendations. These may include:
 - **Thickened Drinks:** Thickened drinks are similar to milk shakes and nectar juices. Drinks or thin liquids including water, tea, coffee, juice or soup can be difficult to swallow because they move very quickly. These liquids may enter the breathing tube. These drinks can be thickened to make them easier to swallow (i.e. ice cream or Jello)

- **Food Texture Changes:** We eat a variety of food textures every day, such as:
 - pureed (e.g., mashed potatoes)
 - minced (e.g., macaroni)
 - soft (e.g., tuna sandwich)
 - regular (e.g., nuts)

When a person has swallowing difficulties they may not be able to eat all the food textures. A swallowing assessment can be useful to check which textures can be swallowed safely. Only eat food textures that are safe and easy.

It's difficult to limit the foods people eat because we all enjoy eating a variety of food textures. It is important for family members to understand that changing these food and drink textures can be very helpful to people.

Helping People with Swallowing Problems:

- **Swallowing Strategies:** The Speech-Language Pathologist may also recommend these techniques to improve swallowing:
 - **Chin tuck** (tucking the chin down to the chest) to prevent food or drink from going down the breathing tube.
 - **Repeat swallows** (swallowing more than once per mouthful) to help clear food or liquid that may be sticking in the throat.
 - **Head Turn to the Right or Left** to help send food or drink down the stronger side.
- **Positioning:**
Sit the person straight with their head slightly forward. Use pillows to stabilize them for meals.
 - For people who cannot feed themselves, sit at eye level to feed. You should always face the person you are feeding.
- **Environment & Set-up:**
 - Reduce distractions in the eating area.
 - Turn off the radio and television.
 - Limit the number of people talking during meal times
 - Place food, cups, and utensils close enough to help the person feed themselves.



Tips for Safe Eating and Swallowing:

- Eat and drink only when fully awake.
- Sit straight in a chair or bed.
- Tell staff if you notice someone who is having trouble eating or drinking.
- Be sure that dentures, hearing aids and glasses are worn for all meals.
- Make sure the mouth is clean and clear before meals.
- Encourage small bites and sips.
- Try to have a slow, relaxed dining experience.
- Be sure the first bite or sip is swallowed before the next is given.
- Watch for movement of the Adam's apple to show the person has swallowed.
- Make sure the mouth is clean and clear of food after every meal.
- Remain sitting straight for 20-30 minutes after eating.