

Decision Making When Your Swallow is Unsafe

Your swallow has been assessed and found to be unsafe. This means food and drink is likely to go down the wrong way into your lungs. When food or fluid enters the lungs this is known as 'aspiration' and can cause a chest infection called aspiration pneumonia.

Decisions will need to be made about how you will receive food and drink.

Because your swallow is unsafe there may be a number of options which your medical team will discuss with you.

1) Tube-feeding with Nil by Mouth

You will stop having any food or drink by mouth. A feeding tube may be inserted through the nose down into the stomach. This is known as a nasogastric or 'NG tube'. Sometimes a feeding tube will be placed for a short time while options are discussed.

If your swallowing difficulties continue longer term, a tube may be placed directly into the stomach (known as a PEG tube or RIG tube) through which you will receive all your food and fluid. Feeding tubes can be removed if no longer required.

Tube-feeding aims to minimise aspiration risk, but may not eliminate it. This is because you will still need to swallow your saliva which might be aspirated. You may also be at risk of aspirating tube feed coming back up (refluxing) from the stomach.

2) Tube-feeding, with 'Tastes for Pleasure'

Sometimes a feeding tube will be placed for your main intake of food and liquid, but you will choose to continue having small amounts of food and/or drink by mouth for comfort or enjoyment. The risk of aspiration is still present, but a Speech and Language Therapist can advise on which consistencies may be safer or more comfortable to try.

3) 'Feeding with risk'

If you do not want a feeding tube, or it is not suitable for you, you may continue to eat and drink by mouth, even though there is a high risk of aspiration and/or choking. This is known as 'feeding with risk', or 'risk feeding'.

Feeding with risk is more likely to take place when:

- There is a medical condition which is not curable.
- There is unlikely to be any improvement in swallow ability.
- A preferred diet is more important for the person's quality of life than swallow safety.

Decision Making When Your Swallow is Unsafe

Decision making when your swallow is unsafe

Any legally competent adult can choose not to have tube-feeding, and continue to eat and drink accepting the risk of swallowing related health complications, such as chest infections.

If you cannot make your own health care decisions (e.g. if you have problems understanding, retaining, or weighing up the information, or if you are unable to express a decision, because of illness, or mental impairment) your doctor makes the decision in your best interests.

They will turn to your family, next of kin, or person appointed as a health care power of attorney, for information to help guide the decision. Any wishes you have previously expressed will be taken into account.

Families and carers will want to know that the decision is right and consistent with your wishes. The health care team is there to support and assist.

Documenting and reviewing the decision

The medical team will document discussions and decisions that have been made. You can change your mind about your decision at anytime.

Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the information in this leaflet further, please speak to your doctor or Speech and Language Therapist.

Speech and Language Therapy Department, Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital
Tel 01603 287117. Monday to Friday 8.30-16.30 (an answerphone is available at other times).

