

What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is the term for swallowing difficulties. People with dysphagia may have difficulty swallowing foods, fluids and/or their saliva.

Symptoms / signs

- Coughing or choking when eating or drinking.
- Food getting stuck in the mouth or throat.
- Throat clearing and / or a wet / gurgly voice during or after eating or drinking.
- Repeated chest infections.
- Breathlessness after swallowing.
- Effortful / painful swallowing.
- Inability to finish meals due to fatigue.
- Unplanned weight loss.
- Difficulty controlling your saliva.

Dysphagia can result in food, fluid or saliva going down the “wrong way” entering the windpipe instead of the food pipe, this is known as **aspiration**. Material can then enter the lungs and cause a chest infection called **aspiration pneumonia**. Often people cough / choke when this happens, however, in some cases food, fluid or saliva can enter the windpipe / lungs without any obvious signs, this is known as **silent aspiration**.

Causes

Dysphagia is usually caused by problems with the **mouth, throat** and/or **oesophagus** (food pipe). Dysphagia may be related to another health condition, such as, general unwellness, neurological conditions, respiratory diseases, dementia, brain injury. It can be short or long term in nature and may improve or worsen.

Dysphagia Management

Management of dysphagia depends on the type and cause of the swallowing difficulties. Dysphagia can be managed with strategies and modifications, but a cure isn't always possible. Speech and Language Therapists work to ensure that people with swallowing difficulties can eat and drink safely where possible.

Advice may include:

- Changing the consistency of food and fluids to make them safer to swallow
- Using special techniques as advised by the Speech and Language Therapist
- Alternative forms of feeding, such as tube feeding through the nose / stomach
- Supporting decision making around dysphagia and feeding options

It is extremely important to follow advice from the Speech and Language Therapist to reduce the risk of serious medical problems such as chest infections, weight loss and dehydration.

Contact Details

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your swallowing, you can call the Speech and Language Therapy Department at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital on 01603 287117 08.30 - 16.30 Monday to Friday.