

The family library

SWALLOWING DISORDERS



What are swallowing disorders?

Swallowing disorders, also called dysphagia, means it takes more time and effort to move food or liquid from the mouth to the stomach. Difficulty swallowing may also be associated with pain. In some cases, one may not be able to swallow at all.

Occasional difficulty swallowing usually isn't cause for concern, and may simply occur when one eats too fast or doesn't chew their food well enough. But persistent difficulty swallowing may indicate a serious medical condition requiring treatment.

Difficulty swallowing can occur at any age, but it's more common in older adults. The causes of swallowing problems vary, and treatment depends on the cause. Because we are discussing the older individual, this paper will concentrate on the aging individual with swallowing difficulties although younger persons and small children can experience swallowing problems as well.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms that can be associated with dysphagia may include:

- Pain while swallowing
- Not being able to swallow
- Sensation of food getting stuck in the throat or chest, or behind the breastbone (sternum)
- Drooling
- Hoarseness
- Bringing food back up (regurgitation)
- Frequent heartburn
- Food or stomach acid backing up into the throat
- Unexpected weight loss
- Coughing or gagging when swallowing

SWALLOWING DISORDERS (cont.)



When to see a doctor

- **Obstructions.** If an obstruction interferes with breathing, emergency help should be called immediately. If one is unable to swallow due to an obstruction, they should go to the nearest emergency department.
- **Ongoing problems.** Slight or occasional difficulty swallowing usually isn't cause for concern or action. But a doctor should be seen if one regularly has difficulty swallowing or if difficulty swallowing is accompanied by weight loss, regurgitation or vomiting.

Diagnosis

A doctor will likely perform a physical examination and may use a variety of tests to determine the cause of a swallowing problem.

Tests that a doctor or a specialist uses may include:

- X-ray with a contrast material (barium X-ray)
- Dynamic swallowing study
- A visual examination of the esophagus (endoscopy)
- Esophageal muscle test (manometry)

Causes

It takes about 50 pairs of muscles and nerves to accomplish the simple act of swallowing, and a number of conditions can interfere with this process. These conditions generally fall into one of two categories: esophageal and oropharyngeal. Sometimes, however, the cause of dysphagia can't be identified.

SWALLOWING DISORDERS(cont.)



Esophageal dysphagia

Esophageal dysphagia refers to the sensation of food sticking or getting hung up in the base of the throat or in the chest.

Oropharyngeal dysphagia

Certain problems related to nerves and muscles can weaken throat muscles, making it difficult to move food from the mouth into the throat and esophagus (pharyngeal paralysis). One may choke, gag or cough when attempting to swallow, or have the sensation of food or fluids going down the windpipe (trachea) or up the nose. This may lead to pneumonia.

Causes of oropharyngeal dysphagia include:

- Neurological disorders
- Neurological damage
- Pharyngeal diverticula (small pouches in the throat)
- Cancer

Treatment

Treatment for swallowing difficulties is often tailored to the particular type or cause of the swallowing disorder.

Oropharyngeal dysphagia

For oropharyngeal dysphagia, a doctor may refer one to a speech or swallowing therapist, and therapy may include exercises and learning swallowing techniques.

Esophageal dysphagia

Treatment approaches for esophageal dysphagia may include:

- Esophageal dilation or stretching
- Surgery
- Medications

SWALLOWING DISORDERS (cont.)



Severe dysphagia

If difficulty swallowing prevents one from eating and drinking adequately, a doctor may recommend:

- Special liquid diets
- Feeding tube

Prevention

Although swallowing difficulties can't be prevented, especially when the cause is neurological in origin, one can reduce the risk of occasional difficulty swallowing by eating slowly and chewing food well. Early detection and effective treatment of GERD can lower the risk of developing dysphagia associated with an esophageal stricture.

Coping and Support

Living with swallowing difficulties can be challenging. Dysphagia may affect interaction with friends and family, productivity at work, and overall quality of life.

Talking to a counselor or therapist can help those with dysphagia cope with the effects of swallowing difficulties. Or one may find encouragement and understanding in a support group.

Although support groups aren't for everyone, they can be good sources of information. Group members often know about the latest treatments and tend to share their own experiences. If people are interested, their doctors may be able to recommend a support group in their area.

For more information on swallowing disorders click [HERE](#) or [HERE](#).