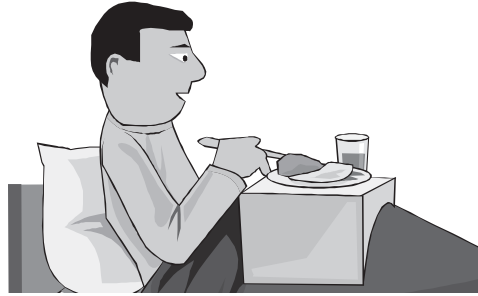




Dysphagia — When It is Hard to Swallow



If you or someone you care for is finding it hard to swallow, please ask for help.

Dysphagia is the medical term for problems in swallowing (or feeding an infant or adult with severe disabilities). It's important to get help to prevent other health problems, and in some cases to save a life. Infants and children with dysphagia may not grow as fast as other children. Anyone who has trouble swallowing food

or liquid may choke or the food/liquid might enter the lungs and lead to pneumonia (infection in the lungs). Some people lose a lot of weight, which can cause even more problems.

Occupational therapists can help people and/or their caregivers to find ways to make swallowing easier. The first step is to identify the problem.

Here are some warning signs

- Weight loss or poor weight gain.
- Concern that the person is not getting enough water or other liquids.
- Difficulty chewing.
- Eating a meal takes a long time.
- Coughing and/or choking while eating or drinking or right after.
- Gagging or regurgitation (person spits up food).
- Heartburn (burning in chest) or indigestion (sore stomach).
- Anxiety about food or swallowing.
- Avoiding or refusing to eat certain foods. Infants refuse to eat more solid, "adult" foods.
- Chest infections not due to any other illness.

What to do

- Ask your doctor to see a feeding and swallowing team (dysphagia service).
- Keep a diary. Write down:
 - The food you tried to eat and what it was like, e.g. if it was meat - what kind, and was it ground or solid?
 - Foods that are easy to swallow, and look for patterns in these.
 - If it's easier to swallow liquids than solid foods, and if this changes.

please turn the page

When swallowing is difficult, continued...



Change how you eat...

- Put less food on each spoon or fork and eat slower.
- Cut food up into small pieces or mash it.
- Avoid foods that are known to cause choking. These include: whole grapes, nuts, and coin-shaped foods (e.g., carrots or hot dogs) and small round or hard candies.
- Eat small meals so you don't get as tired.
- Sit up straight while eating and for 30 minutes after. You may need cushions or specialized seating to help with this.

CAOT wishes to acknowledge the work of Jan Wilson, BSc(OT), OT(C), of Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital, Edmonton and her colleagues for assisting with this consumer tip.

In addition to the above, when feeding someone, try these tips:

- Make sure the person is as upright as possible.
- Always be there or have someone there to watch at meal times.
- Check to see if they want to feed themselves and let them try.
- Allow finger feeding and handling of food if they wish.
- Keep track of changes in how fast they eat and what goes wrong when they eat specific foods.
- Never prop up baby bottles.
- Don't feed children in car seats, especially those foods listed on the left.
- For babies, check the nipple to make sure the hole is not too large and the liquid does not pour too quickly.

These suggestions are general in nature. If you are having trouble, please ask your doctor to see a clinician experienced in swallowing difficulties. He or she may be an occupational therapist, speech language pathologist, dietitian, nurse, physician or psychologist. If you can, find a team made up of these professionals.

Visit www.otworks.ca and click on 'OT Finder' to locate an occupational therapist closest to you.



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