

Learning about Dysphagia

One of a series of pamphlets about Speech after Stroke

Learning about Dysphagia

A stroke is damage to part of the brain. It happens when a blood vessel in the brain gets blocked or when it bursts.

A stroke can cause many different problems, depending on the part and amount of the brain that is damaged.

This pamphlet explains **dysphagia**, or difficulties with swallowing.

Dysphagia happens when the muscles in the mouth and/or throat become weak after a stroke.

Some people with dysphagia have difficulty chewing food and moving it around in their mouth.

This is because their jaw and tongue cannot move as quickly or as accurately as they used to.

Other people with dysphagia have difficulty actually swallowing the food. It might take them a long time to start swallowing after they are finished chewing. Or, food may stay in the throat even after the person has swallowed.

These problems can make food “go down the wrong way” – into the windpipe instead of the food tube to the stomach. This is because the throat muscles do not work as well as they used to.

Sometimes the dysphagia is very severe and the person will need to be fed through a tube in their stomach. Other times the dysphagia is mild and the person may only have difficulty with certain foods or drinks.

So what can you do to help?

The best thing to do is to speak with the person who has had the stroke as well as to his/her speech-language pathologist. They will be able to tell you which foods and drinks are the safest to swallow.

Here are some suggestions to keep in mind when speaking with a person with dysphagia:

- ✓ Encourage the person to eat slowly. Make sure each mouthful of food or fluid is swallowed before another spoonful or sip is taken.
- ✓ Make sure the person takes small mouthfuls. A large mouthful can make swallowing more dangerous.

More suggestions ...

- ✓ Encourage the person to take 2 swallows per mouthful. This way, if there is any food left in the throat, the person can swallow it before it has a chance to accidentally go down the windpipe.
- ✓ Watch the person for any signs of chest infection or pneumonia. If food continually goes down the wrong way, it might cause a chest infection and this should be treated right away.
- ✓ Watch the person for signs of difficulty swallowing that increases the risk of a chest infection. Such signs include choking, frequent coughing and/or throat clearing when eating or drinking. If such signs are noticed, inform the physician or Speech-Language Pathologist immediately.

If you would like more information, please call the Speech-Language Pathologist below:

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