

## What can be done?

A health professional trained in assessing and treating swallowing problems will check your swallow to see what part of the swallowing process is a problem.

Once, they identify what problems you are having, they will work with you to make a plan for safe swallowing.

Your plan might include:

- best positions for eating
- best position to be in after your meal
- help with meals
- use of special dishes or cutlery
- changes to your food or drink texture
- change to bite or sip size
- new ways to improve swallowing
- exercises for mouth and throat
- diet and lifestyle changes
- products to relieve dry mouth
- ways to control saliva in case of drooling

## What can you do?

Ways to make swallowing safer and easier:

- ✓ Eat and drink slowly.
- ✓ Take small bites and sips.
- ✓ Swallow before talking.
- ✓ Focus carefully when eating.
- ✓ Keep distractions to a minimum while eating
- ✓ Sit upright while eating and after meals.
- ✓ Choose soft and moist foods.
- ✓ If wearing dentures, make sure that they fit well.
- ✓ Brush your teeth and clean your mouth before and after meals.

## It's Good to Ask

To learn more about dysphagia and support services in your area, ask:

- Your family doctor
- Your local hospital for Speech Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, or Dietitian Services
- Fraser Health Outpatient Rehabilitation 604-587-4621

You can also call 8-1-1 (HealthLinkBC) to speak to a registered nurse or dietitian.

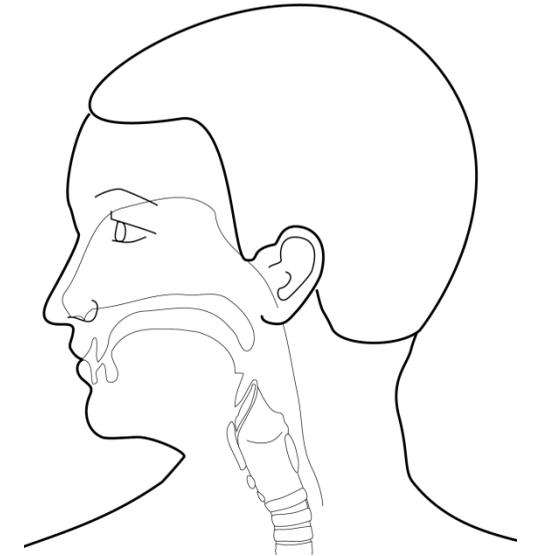
Contact:

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# Swallowing Problems (Dysphagia)



[www.fraserhealth.ca](http://www.fraserhealth.ca)

This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.

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To order: [patienteduc@fraserhealth.ca](mailto:patienteduc@fraserhealth.ca)



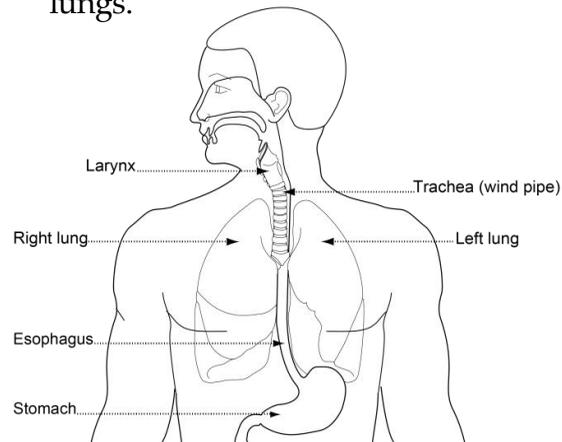
## What is Dysphagia?

Some people have problems swallowing when eating solid food and/or drinking liquids. When you have trouble swallowing, we call it 'dysphagia' (sounds like *dis-fay-jah*).

Swallowing is a process used to move food or liquid from the mouth to the stomach.

Swallowing involves being able to:

1. Place and sense food in your mouth.
2. Chew and break down the food.
3. Mix the food with saliva (spit).
4. Move food and liquid down your throat and esophagus (tube connecting your throat to your stomach).
5. Close off your airway (wind pipe) so food and liquid do not go into your lungs.



Healthy people swallow without thinking  
- it comes naturally.

Swallowing Problems (Dysphagia)

## What causes swallowing problems?

Swallowing problems can happen at any age, but are more common in older adults.

A number of diseases and medical conditions disrupt the swallowing process, resulting in swallowing problems.

Swallowing problems can be caused by:

- damage or injury to nerves and muscles
- something blocking the throat or esophagus
- side effects of medicines
- general poor health and weakness

Examples of causes
<b>Nerve and muscle damage:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Stroke</li><li>- Head injury</li><li>- Multiple Sclerosis</li><li>- Parkinson's disease</li><li>- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)</li><li>- Muscular Dystrophy</li><li>- Myasthenia Gravis</li><li>- Dementia/Alzheimer's disease</li></ul>
<b>Other causes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Injury, use of a breathing tube during surgery or recovery, neck/throat surgery, cancer, and/or radiation to the head, neck, and chest</li><li>- Problems breathing such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)</li><li>- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)</li></ul>

## What are the signs of dysphagia?

You might notice one or more of these signs:

- coughing
- choking
- throat clearing
- drooling
- gurgly voice
- difficulty moving food or drink in the mouth
- difficulty starting the swallow
- having to swallow several times after each bite or sip
- food or drink spilling from the mouth
- food or drink going into the nose
- food left in the mouth after swallowing
- food coming back up
- runny nose
- eyes watering during mealtimes
- not wanting to eat or avoiding certain foods
- taking longer to eat
- having a feeling of food 'sticking' in the throat or lower down
- pain while swallowing

## Why do we worry about dysphagia?

Dysphagia can make eating and drinking difficult. If a person doesn't drink enough liquids, it can lead to dehydration (lack of water). If a person doesn't eat enough, it can lead to malnutrition (lack of proper nutrition).

For some people with swallowing problems, they are embarrassed and worried when eating with others, making mealtimes an unpleasant experience.

A swallowing problem can also cause food, liquid, or even saliva to go into the lungs. This is called 'aspiration' (sounds like *ass-per-ay-shun*). If you aspirate, you can get a lung infection such as pneumonia (sounds like *new-mohn-yah*).



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