NHS
West Suffolk
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information

Swallowing difficulties and respiratory conditions

You have been given this leaflet because you may experience difficulty swallowing as a result of your respiratory condition. Difficulty swallowing is often termed 'dysphagia'.

Why might swallowing be a problem?

Swallowing is a complex process which involves careful coordination of breathing and the temporary closing off of the airway. When breathing is effortful, the coordination of swallowing and breathing can become impaired. As the airway is not fully protected, this can cause small amounts of food / drink to collect in the throat which could 'go down the wrong way' (aspiration). If aspiration occurs, it could lead to an increased risk of developing chest infections and pneumonia.

Signs of a swallowing difficulty

- Increased time / difficulty chewing dry or chewy foods. This can be effortful and tiring
- Sensation of food or drink sticking in the throat
- Coughing or throat clearing during or after eating and drinking
- Increased shortness of breath during or after eating and drinking.

People may find that swallowing difficulties come and go alongside fluctuating respiratory difficulties

Managing swallowing difficulties

- Ensure you are sitting fully upright when eating and drinking.
- Aim for slow and relaxed eating. Allow plenty of time and take regular breaks if you are getting tired.
- Have small, regular meals / snacks rather than large meals.
- Take small sips of drink and small bites of food at a time.
- Check that all the food / drink has gone from your mouth before taking the next mouthful.
- Alternate sips of drink with mouthfuls of food. This can help to clear food from your mouth or throat during a meal.
- If you are breathless or require oxygen, check with a nurse or doctor for advice on the best way to eat and drink safely as coordinating swallowing and breathing can be more difficult.
- Respiratory conditions can often cause fatigue, make sure you are alert and comfortable before eating and drinking.

If you notice that you are having difficulty eating or drinking, or if you think it is getting worse, let your doctor, nurse or speech and language therapist know.

Swallowing difficulties can improve, fluctuate, or persist depending on your condition. Recommendations made by the speech and language therapist will reflect your changing needs. We are happy to offer further support or advice.

For further information

Please contact the Speech and Language Therapy department on

01284 713303

West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust is actively involved in clinical research. Your doctor, clinical team or the research and development department may contact you regarding specific clinical research studies that you might be interested in participating in. If you do not wish to be contacted for these purposes, please email info.gov@wsh.nsh.uk. This will in no way affect the care or treatment you receive.

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (the new name for DisabledGo) https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust

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