Leicestershire Partnership NHS
NHS Trust

Community Health Services









Dysphagia - swallowing difficulties

Diagram or specific photo - DG to source

Information for patients, relatives and carers

www.leicspt.nhs.uk

Email: feedback@leicspart.nhs.uk

Adult Speech and Language Therapy Service
Providing a service to
University Hospitals of Leicester (UHL)
and the residents of Leicester,
Leicestershire and Rutland

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia is a medical term for difficulty with swallowing. Some people with dysphagia have problems swallowing certain foods or liquids, whilst others cannot swallow at all. It can be either a short or long-term condition.

What happens when you swallow?

Most people take eating and drinking for granted but swallowing is a very complicated process. There are many muscles and nerves which are involved in swallowing. Normally when you swallow you:

1. Hold and chew liquid/food in your mouth without dribbling.
2. Hold and chew liquid/food in your mouth without breathing it into your lungs.
3. Move the liquid/food to the back of your mouth using the tongue until the liquid or food triggers the swallowing reflex.

It is important during this journey that your airway is closed so that the food/drink cannot spill down into your lungs. This is known as aspiration. If this happens you are at risk of developing a chest infection or even pneumonia. At worst aspiration is lifethreatening.

Diagram

What causes dysphagia?

Dysphagia is usually caused by another health condition, such as:

- a condition affecting the nervous system such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, a head injury or dementia
- cancer, such as mouth cancer, throat cancer, oesophageal cancer or brain tumours
- gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD), where stomach acid leaks back up into the oesophagus (the tube that carries food from your mouth to your stomach), or other conditions that cause narrowing of the oesophagus because of scarring.

Symptoms of dysphagia

The symptoms of dysphagia include:

- coughing or choking when eating or drinking
- not being able to swallow
- pain when swallowing
- bringing food back up, sometimes through the nose
- a sensation that food is stuck in the throat or chest

Longer-term symptoms may include:

- unexplained weight loss
- developing repeated and frequent chest infections

Dysphagia can cause distress so it is important that these symptoms are recognised and treated quickly.

How do we assess you?

The speech and language therapist (SLT) is an expert in identifying and treating swallowing problems. Assessment may include examining the inside of your mouth and movements of the tongue, watching you eat/drink different types of food, 'feeling' you swallow and listening to your breathing. In some instances you may require further investigation such as an x-ray image of your swallow.

What can be done if a swallowing problem is identified?

The SLT will make recommendations according to the type of swallowing problem that has been diagnosed. Particular exercises may be advised and will be explained and demonstrated by the speech and language therapist.

The Speech and Language Therapist may suggest certain types of food and drink which are safer to swallow, for example thickened fluids, soft, mashed or pureed food. Sometimes if the risk of food and liquid getting onto your lungs is too great it may be recommended that you do not have anything to eat and drink. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

The Speech and Language Therapist may also be able to suggest exercises and other strategies that can help in safer swallowing.

Help for family members

Useful tips

If you are giving someone with dysphagia food or drink you can help them by:

- consistently following the SLT's swallow advice
- ensuring that any snacks given are suitable (ask ward staff)
- ensure that they are sat upright. Ask for assistance if required

- not offering food/drink if they are sleepy
- discouraging talking whilst eating or drinking
- avoiding using spouted beakers/straws unless suggested by a SLT.
- encouraging them to practise any exercises left by the SLT

Will it get better?

It depends on the severity of the condition. Some swallowing problems resolve quickly, but others take longer to improve. Sometimes the problem may worsen, or the swallow may not improve at all. Alternative methods of feeding may need to be considered in these instances, such as a feeding tube. This might be a nasogastric tube (NGT) or a percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG tube). Nutrition would then be provided via one of these tubes in a liquid form advised by the clinician.

Specific advice

More information

Your speech and language therapist is

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If you need this information in another language or format please telephone 0116 295 0903 or email: Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

Arabic

إذا كنت في حاجة إلى قراءة هذه المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتنسيق مختلف، يرجى الاتصال بهاتف رقم 01162950903 أو إرسال بريد إلكتروني إلى: Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

Bengali

যদি এই তথ্য অন্য কোন ভাষায় বা ফরমেটে আপনার দরকার হয় তাহলে দয়া করে 0116 295 0903 নম্বরে ফোন করুন বা Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk ঠিকানায় ই-মেইল করুন।

Cantonese

如果您需要將本資訊翻譯為其他語言或用其他格式顯示，請致電 0116 295 0903 或發電子郵件至：Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

Gujarati

જો તમારે આ માહિતી અન્ય ભાષા અથવા ફોર્મેટમાં જોઇતી હોય તો 0116 295 0903 પર ટેલિફોન કરો અથવા Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk પર ઇમેઇલ કરો.

Hindi

अगर आप यह जानकारी किसी अन्य भाषा या प्रारूप में चाहते हैं तो कृपया 0116 295 0903 पर हमें फोन करें या Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk पर हमें ईमेल करें

Polish

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem niniejszych informacji w innym języku lub formacie, prosimy skontaktować się z nami telefonicznie pod numerem 0116 295 0903 lub za pośrednictwem poczty elektronicznej na adres: Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਜਾਂ ਫਾਰਮੈਟ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ 0116 295 0903 ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫ਼ੋਨ ਕਰੋ ਜਾਂ ਇੱਥੇ ਈਮੇਲ ਕਰੋ: Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

Somali

Haddii aad rabto in aad warbixintan ku hesho luqad ama nuskhad kale fadlan soo wac lambarka 0116 295 0903 ama email u dir: Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

Urdu

اگرآپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان یا صورت میں درکار ہوں تو براہ کرم اس ٹیلی فون نمبر 0116 295 0903 یا ای میل پر رابطہ کریں Patient.Information@leicspart.nhs.uk

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