

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

Eating, Drinking and Swallowing Difficulties (Dysphagia)

Which children may have dysphagia?

A child's difficulties with eating, drinking and swallowing can be part of certain health conditions such as;

- Babies who are born premature
- Children with a diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy
- Children who have a difficulty acquired later in their childhood
- Children with a heart condition or a condition that affects their breathing
- Children born with other diagnoses e.g. cleft lip and/or palate or Down's Syndrome
- Children with gastro-oesophageal reflux
- Complex medical conditions
- Children with a delay to their development
- Children with interrupted or challenging early feeding experiences

Not all children with the conditions described will have difficulties with their eating, drinking or swallowing.

There may also be children who do not have one of the conditions above who experience difficulties with their eating, drinking, and swallowing.

A child's difficulties can be present from birth, or they may develop as a child gets older.

How does dysphagia affect children?

Some children with dysphagia may find it difficult to manage particular foods or textures, whilst other children may have difficulties in swallowing all food and drink.

This may be due to difficulties in co-ordinating movements of the lips, tongue and jaw and some children may have more difficulties with their swallow.

Some children with heart and breathing conditions may tire more easily during feeding.

Some children may have difficulties with the taste and feel of some foods leading to a restricted diet or gagging, vomiting and food aversion.

Signs and Symptoms of Dysphagia

The signs and symptoms described may change depending on the type of food your child is eating and may vary at different times of the day;

- Coughing and/or choking during or after feeding
- Changing colour and/or noisy breathing during or after feeding
- Unexplained regular chest infections (i.e. not related to colds/viruses)
- Refusing food and drink
- Difficulty chewing and moving onto more challenging textures
- Gagging and/or vomiting during feeding
- Extended feeding times
- Difficulties managing saliva over the age of 4 years old.