

After a Stroke: Swallowing Disorders

What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is difficulty with swallowing after a stroke. Dysphagia may lead to swallowing food or liquid down the ‘wrong pipe’ meaning what you eat or drink may enter your lungs. This is called aspiration. At times, food or liquid may enter your lungs, but you may not notice this is occurring. This is called ‘silent aspiration’. During the hospital stay, all stroke patients will have a screening of swallowing.

What are the signs and symptoms of dysphagia?

- Drooling or difficulty managing saliva
- Weakness of the muscles including the lip, jaw, tongue or palate
- Difficulty chewing food
- Coughing or choking while eating or drinking
- Foods caught in one or both sides of the mouth
- Sensation of food sticking in the throat
- Voice may be ‘wet’ or have a ‘gurgling’ quality
- Slower rate of eating or drinking leading to longer meal times
- Difficulty swallowing pills
- Unexplained weight loss
- Respiratory infection such as pneumonia

What should I expect during the swallow screening?

After a stroke, the nurse will perform a Swallow Screening before you are allowed to eat, drink or take medication. The nurse will attempt the screening in the Emergency Room once you are awake, able to sit up and are comfortable with your breathing. The screening includes chewing a piece of ice, and

swallowing water from a spoon, a cup and through a straw. If you do well, you will begin a regular diet.

What should I expect during the swallow evaluation?

If you experience difficulty with the screening, you will have an evaluation of swallowing completed by a Speech-Language Pathologist. This first evaluation is completed at your bedside and will include a test of the movements and strength of the muscles of your mouth and throat. You will be given sips of water and small to larger bites of pureed food such as applesauce. This test may also include soft or solid foods.

The Speech-Language Pathologist will review the results of this evaluation with you and your family. If there are concerns for your ability to safely swallow liquids or foods, the Speech Pathologist will speak to your doctor about the next step which may include a formal test of swallowing that is completed in Radiology: the Videofluoroscopic Swallow Study (VFSS).

What is the Videofluoroscopic Swallow Study (VFSS)?

The VFSS is a test procedure in which you are seated in a chair and a moving x-ray is made to observe how the muscles within the mouth and throat move while drinking and eating.

If this study shows that you have difficulty clearing food or liquid from your mouth or throat or, if food or liquid enters the wrong way (entering your windpipe or trachea), your doctor may decide to place a temporary feeding tube while you begin your recovery after the stroke.

How will I be treated for swallowing difficulties?

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The Speech-Language Pathologist will continue to evaluate your muscle movement and strength. One way they will evaluate you is by giving you food or liquid trials to determine whether there are strategies or exercises to improve your ability to swallow. The Speech Pathologist may work with you on the following:

- Positioning of your head or neck and upper body while eating or drinking
- Strategies that include change in the amount per bite or sip
- Resistance exercises to help strengthen muscles that may be affected

How will I eat and drink?

As your swallowing function improves, you may begin to eat or drink food or liquid of different textures. These are called “Dysphagia Diets” which include:

Food:

- Level I (puree: mashed solid)
- Level 2 (semi-solid: minimal chewing required)
- Level 3 (soft solid: chewing is necessary)
- Level 4 (general: no restriction on the texture of the food).

Liquid:

- Thin (water, milk, soda, coffee, etc.)
- Nectar-Thick (liquids in a ‘nectar’ consistency)
- Honey-Thick (liquids thickened to texture similar to honey)
- Spoon-Thick (pudding-like texture)

Reminders:

While you are recovering your swallowing ability, continued oral care is important including tooth brushing and taking care of dentures. This helps to keep your mouth clean and healthy.

It is important to let the Speech Pathologist know about any questions or concerns you may have about eating during your hospitalization. Improving swallowing may take time: the extent of the stroke will affect the course of recovery. Education about your swallowing will help you understand how to work with your Speech Pathologist to maximize your recovery over time. You can contact the Speech-Language Pathology Department at 734-763-4003.

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