

SWALLOWING DIFFICULTIES AFTER STROKE.

A Guide for Patients and Carers



You have been given this leaflet because you or a loved one has suffered a stroke and is having problems with swallowing.

This leaflet explains:

- How a stroke can cause swallowing difficulties
- Why swallowing difficulties should not be ignored
- Where to go for more information and advice
- How to prepare for your return home
- Tips to make mealtimes more enjoyable

WHAT IS A STROKE?

A stroke is a “brain attack”. It happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is suddenly cut off due to a blockage or leakage. Without a blood supply, the affected part of the brain may stop working.

The effects of a stroke depend on which part of the brain was affected and how long the blood supply was cut off for.

HOW CAN A STROKE AFFECT SWALLOWING?

Normally, swallowing happens without much thought or effort. It is actually a very complex process that needs the brain to co-ordinate some 50 pairs of different muscles.

If a stroke damages a part of the brain that helps control swallowing, it can affect your ability to chew and swallow safely (known as dysphagia).

A clear glass filled with water sits on a folded grey cloth napkin. The background is softly blurred, showing hints of a kitchen setting with a yellow object, possibly a banana, and a white surface.

Did
YOU
KNOW?

Over half of patients experience swallowing difficulties immediately after a stroke; in most people, swallowing returns to normal within 6 months.

WHAT SORT OF PROBLEMS MIGHT YOU NOTICE AFTER A STROKE?

A stroke can cause various difficulties when eating:

- Trouble with chewing
- Food sticking in the throat
- Coughing or choking while swallowing
- Needing to swallow many times to clear the mouth
- Regurgitating food or drink through the nose or mouth
- Taking a long time to finish a meal
- Having a croaky or “wet” sounding voice
- Dribbling

WHY DOES DYSPHAGIA MATTER?

Dysphagia matters because it can lead to other health problems, such as lung infections, poor nutrition and dehydration. It also stops people enjoying mealtimes and social occasions.

WEIGHT LOSS, MALNUTRITION AND DEHYDRATION

Good nutrition and hydration is essential throughout our lives. It is particularly important after a stroke, when the body is working extra hard to recover.

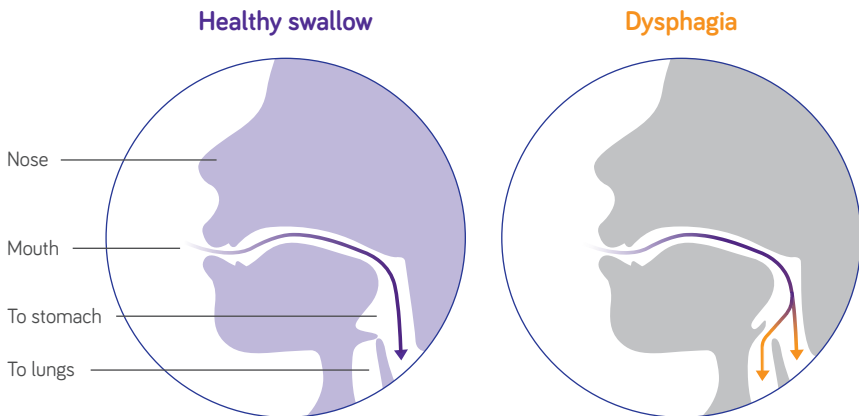
If you have swallowing difficulties, mealtimes may not be enjoyable. You may find swallowing uncomfortable or even painful, feel anxious about choking, and take a long time to finish a meal.

When mealtimes are less enjoyable, you may limit how often and how much you eat. Over time this can lead to weight loss, malnutrition, and dehydration – all of which make it harder for your body to recover.

ASPIRATION AND PNEUMONIA

In people with dysphagia, food and drink may accidentally go into the airways instead of into the stomach. This is called “aspiration”.

The body’s natural reaction to food “going down the wrong way” is to cough. But people who have suffered a stroke may not have this reaction, meaning that food or drink ends up in the lungs. This can cause a serious lung infection known as pneumonia.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO MAKE SWALLOWING EASIER?

If you experience dysphagia after a stroke, help and support are at hand.

Your doctors and other medical professionals will want to assess you and offer appropriate treatment and advice. And once you return home, there are many things you and your loved ones can do to make mealtimes more enjoyable.

SPECIALIST MEDICAL SUPPORT

Various medical specialists help people with dysphagia.

You may be referred to a **speech and language therapist** to teach you exercises and techniques to strengthen your mouth, tongue and throat. You may also see a **dietician** for advice on which types of food and drinks are easiest and safest to consume.

Mealtimes: more than just nutrition

First and foremost, eating and drinking are necessary to give your body the right nutrients for good health. But mealtimes are also important for your quality of life. Ideally, mealtimes should be positive, relaxed, enjoyable occasions.

CHANGES TO YOUR DIET

People with dysphagia find it safer and easier to swallow food and drink with a thick, smooth texture.

Your medical specialists may recommend using **thickening powders** or pre-thickened nutrition to improve the texture of food and drink. They may also advise you to take **dietary supplements** to ensure you are getting all the calories, vitamins and minerals your body needs.



Questions to ask your healthcare professional

- How badly affected is my swallowing?
- Is my swallowing likely to improve over time?
- How thick should I make my food and drinks?
- Are there any types of food or drink that I should avoid?
- Is my medication available in a non-tablet form?
- Do I need to take a dietary supplement?
- How often will my swallowing be assessed?

GETTING READY FOR YOUR RETURN HOME

Preparing food for someone with swallowing difficulties can feel daunting, but it becomes easier with practice. The main challenge is making food and drinks a suitable thickness and texture for swallowing.

Having the right cooking equipment and utensils is a great start – you may have most of these in your kitchen already!



TIPS FOR MAKING MEALTIMES MORE ENJOYABLE

- ✓ Always sit upright, with a straight back
- ✓ Focus on eating and don't rush
- ✓ Take small mouthfuls
- ✓ Swallow twice after each mouthful
- ✓ Chilled foods can be easier to swallow
- ✗ Don't talk while eating
- ✗ Don't use a straw unless you have been told it is safe

Foods to avoid

- ✗ Thin or watery liquid foods, like tea, soup, or juice
- ✗ Sticky foods
- ✗ Dry foods, like bread, potatoes, or cake
- ✗ Nuts and seeds

MY NOTES

Dysphagia Connect



Nutricia Medical Devices B.V/ Trading reg.: 27093366
Taurusavenue 167 / 2132 LS Hoofddorp - P.O.Box 75538 / 1118 ZN Schiphol Airport /
The Netherlands - Tel: +31 20 4569000 / www.nutriciafocare.com

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