

SWALLOWING DISORDERS / DYSPHAGIA



Dysphagia or **swallowing disorder**, is a term used to describe the inability to move food from the mouth to the stomach. This condition can accompany a neurological disorder such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy, Lou Gehrig's disease, or others, as well as bacterial, viral, or fungal infections.

DIAGNOSIS

Dysphagia can occur at any of the 3 stages of swallowing:

- ▶ **Oral:** During this phase the problem is in the mouth. This is due to the movement of the tongue.
- ▶ **Pharyngeal:** The problem is regarding food passing through the throat.
- ▶ **Esophageal:** When food is unable to move down through the esophagus.

A diagnosis may include:

- ▶ **Flexible Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES):** Flexible endoscopic evaluation of swallowing (FEES) is a test performed to diagnose swallowing difficulties. FEES is performed with a thin, lighted camera known as an endoscope. The endoscope is placed into the throat before the patient consumes several different foods with food coloring that can be easily monitored as they travel down the throat. After the test, your doctor will discuss the results with you. If any issues were found, a customized treatment plan will be created for your individual condition.
- ▶ **Modified Barium Swallowing Study (Also known as a Cookie Swallow or Videofluoroscopy):** A modified barium swallowing study is performed to diagnose swallowing or speaking problems. You are not to eat or drink anything for a few hours before the exam. When you arrive for your modified barium swallowing study, you will be given a contrast solution to swallow, which will highlight the various structures associated with swallowing and speaking onto the fluoroscope used during this exam. To further pinpoint your exact condition, you will be asked to swallow numerous barium preparations of differing consistencies so that your doctor can watch the barium travel down your esophagus.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms for swallowing disorders may include:

- ▶ Coughing
- ▶ Chest discomfort or pain
- ▶ Choking
- ▶ Sore throat
- ▶ Shortness of breath

TREATMENT

- ▶ **Diet:** Depending on the type of swallowing disorder, changing a person's diet by adding thickeners and physical therapy may help alleviate the problem in noninvasive ways.
- ▶ **Therapy:** Patients experiencing swallowing difficulties can benefit from swallowing therapy. Working with a speech pathologist, the patient will learn special exercises to improve functioning of the muscles associated with swallowing.
- ▶ **Antibiotics:** Sometimes drug therapy helps relieve symptoms of the underlying neurological cause, and thus relieves the swallowing problems.
- ▶ **Injections:** Less commonly, botulinum toxin injections can be used when food or liquid cannot enter the esophagus.
- ▶ **Surgery:** Severely affected individuals may require surgery or feeding tubes.