

Adults: Swallowing Guidelines for Referral to Speech-Language Pathologists

Most Common Etiologies:

- Head and neck cancer
- Parkinson's disease
- Stroke
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI)

Related Terms:

Aspiration, choking, coughing, cough reflex, dry mouth, dysarthria, dysphagia, fiberoptic endoscopic evaluation of swallowing, gag reflex, gastrostomy tube (G-tube), intubation, modified barium swallow (MBS), nasogastric tube (NG tube), scintigraphy, silent aspiration, structural deviation, swallowing, tracheostomy, ultrasonography, and videofluoroscopic swallowing function study.

Potential Consequences:

- At risk for illness or death due to silent aspiration, aspiration, malnutrition or dehydration.
- Denial/lack of awareness of type and degree of impairments and risks.
- Compromised quality of life by limiting oral feeding, preferred foods, liquids, and/or dietary variety.
- Compromised social pleasure of dining with family and friends. Loss of independence/restricted to home for meals due to food preparation or non-oral feeding needs.

Behaviors that Should Trigger an SLP Referral:

High Risk Symptoms:

- Absent/weak cough reflex.
- Wet gurgly voice
- Breathy hoarse voice
- Poor respiratory control during eating/swallowing.
- Frequent coughing/choking.

General Signs/Symptoms:

- Difficulty in monitoring rate and/or amount food/liquid intake.
- Makes inappropriate food selection; resists dietary modifications.
- Continuous talking while eating.
- Eats rapidly or extremely slowly.
- Denies and neglects food on left side of plate.
- Diet texture reduction or presence of gastrostomy or nasogastric tube without history of dysphagia evaluation.
- Weight loss/dehydration with unsuccessful dietary intervention.
- Weight loss/dehydration with denial of swallowing difficulty, but no other etiology.

- Neck hyperextension with poor respiratory control.
- Involuntary movements of body, head, and mouth interfere with eating and/or swallowing.
- Presence of tracheotomy tube.
- Fatigues when eating/drinking.

Oral Signs & Symptoms

- Food residue remains on lips or in mouth after eating.
- Cannot keep lips closed while chewing.
- Large pieces of food remain in mouth before swallowing and/or over chewing.
- Involuntary swallow interrupts chewing.
- Difficulty chewing meat or crunchy, dense fruits and/or vegetables (i.e., celery, broccoli, apple) thoroughly prior to swallow.
- Food/liquid leaks through lips during swallowing.
- Leakage and/or reduced pressure when drinking through straw and/or from cup.
- Slurring or no speech.
- Abnormal structure/function of mouth, lips, and palate.
- Poor tongue control and/or oral sensation.
- Slow movement of food to back of mouth (may be due to slow start of tongue movement, incoordination, or tongue pumping).
- Difficulty managing secretions or “dry mouth.”

Pharyngeal/Esophageal Signs & Symptoms

- Gag reflexes may be reduced or hyperactive.
- Nasal regurgitation.
- Repeated swallows necessary to clear all food from mouth and/or throat.
- Food/liquid comes back up into mouth immediately or significantly later than the swallow.
- Complains of fullness; food/pill stuck in throat; chest pain, discomfort.