

Swallowing Disorders

Difficulty in swallowing is called 'dysphagia'. It occurs in all age groups. The term dysphagia refers to the feeling of difficulty passing food or liquid from the mouth to the stomach. This may be caused by many factors, most of which are temporary and not threatening. Difficulties in swallowing rarely represent a more serious disease. When the difficulty does not clear up by itself in a short period of time, you should see doctor.

How do we normally swallow?

People normally swallow hundreds of times a day to eat solids, drink liquids and swallow the normal saliva and mucus that the body produces. The process of swallowing has four related stages:

- The first stage is the oral preparation stage, where food or liquid is manipulated and chewed in preparation for swallowing.
- The second stage is the oral stage, where the tongue propels the food or liquid to the back of the mouth, starting the swallowing response.
- The third stage is the pharyngeal stage, which begins as food or liquid is quickly passed through the pharynx, the region of the throat which connects the mouth with the esophagus, then into the esophagus.
- The fourth stage is the esophageal stage, where the food or liquid passes through the esophagus into the stomach.

The first and second stages have some voluntary control but stages three and four occur involuntarily, without conscious input.

What are the symptoms of swallowing disorders?

- a feeling that food or liquid is sticking in the throat
- discomfort in the throat or chest
- a sensation of a foreign body or "lump" in the throat
- weight loss and inadequate nutrition due to prolonged or more significant problems with swallowing
- coughing or choking caused by bits of food, liquid, or saliva not passing easily during swallowing, and being sucked into the lungs
- voice change
- drooling

What causes swallowing disorders?

Any that interrupts the swallowing process can cause difficulties. Many things can cause swallowing problems. These include:

- infections
- acid reflux
- muscular problems of the esophagus
- pouches, or diverticulum, arising out of the esophagus (Zenckers' Diverticulum)
- scars or narrowing of the esophagus
- benign or malignant growths
- connective tissue diseases

- trauma
- medications

How are swallowing disorders diagnosed?

When dysphagia is persistent and the cause is not apparent, the otolaryngologist will discuss the history of your problem and examine your mouth and throat. This may be done with the aid of a fiber optic scope. Using this instrument, the doctor can visualize the back of the tongue, throat and voice box. Your doctor may then order a variety of different tests to help diagnose your problem. This can include a swallowing x-ray (barium swallow), FEES or FEEST. These last two tests are done by speech therapists. FEES stands for Fiber optic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing. This is similar to the fiber optic scope procedure but in the therapist watches you swallow foods of varying textures. FEESST (Flexible Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing with Sensory Testing) is very similar. Very often, the esophagus needs to be examined. This can be done in the ENT office without sedation using a procedure called Trans Nasal Esophagoscopy (TNE). This is done with a local anesthetic and allows the doctor to visualize the esophagus all the way to the stomach. Sometimes, a gastroenterologist will do an EGD (esophago-gastro-duodenoscopy) which allows visualization past the esophagus into the stomach and the first part of the small intestine.

How are swallowing disorders treated?

Once the cause is determined, swallowing disorders may be treated with medication, swallowing therapy or surgery.

- Medications that slow stomach acid production, muscle relaxants, and antacids are a few of the many medicines available. Treatment is tailored to the particular cause of the swallowing disorder.
- Gastro esophageal reflux can often be treated by changing eating and living habits in these ways:
 - Eat a bland diet with smaller, more frequent meals.
 - Eliminate tobacco, alcohol and caffeine.
 - Reduce weight and stress.
 - Avoid food within three hours of bedtime.
 - Elevate the head of the bed at night.
- Many swallowing disorders may be helped by swallowing therapy. A speech pathologist can provide special exercises for coordinating the swallowing muscles or stimulating the nerves that trigger the swallow reflex. Patients may also be taught simple ways to place food in the mouth or position the body and head to help the swallow occur successfully.
- Surgery is used to treat certain problems. If a muscle is too tight, it may need to be dilated or released surgically. This procedure is called a myotomy. If a Zencker's diverticulum is diagnosed, the diverticulum may be surgically treated as well. These procedures are most often done by ENT surgeons. If a narrowing exists in the throat or esophagus, the area may need to be stretched or dilated.