

# Swallowing and Eating Problems (Dysphagia)

## About Swallowing Problems



Swallowing is an important part of eating and drinking.

It is how your food and drink gets from your mouth into your stomach.



Some people have problems swallowing, or can't swallow at all.

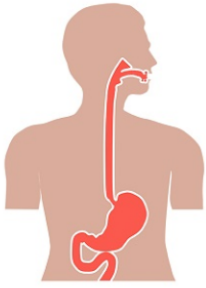
This is called **dysphagia**.



There are 2 types of swallowing problems.



One is caused by problems with the **mouth and throat** (this is called oropharyngeal dysphagia).



One is caused by problems with your **food pipe** – this is the pipe that connects your throat to your stomach (this is called oesophageal dysphagia).



Swallowing problems are usually caused by other things.



These include:

- Things which affect the brain and spinal cord, like a stroke.



- Things which affect the way the brain and body work and grow, like a learning disability.

## Cancer



- Things which block your throat or food pipe, like throat cancer.



- Things which make it hard for your muscles to push food down – this often happens as people get older.

## What Are The Symptoms of Swallowing Problems?

Symptoms are signs that something is wrong.



If you have swallowing problems you might:



- Cough or choke when you eat or drink.



- Bring food back up through your mouth or nose.



- Feel like food is stuck in your throat or chest.



- Have saliva dribbling out of your mouth a lot.



- Not be able to chew food properly.



- Make a 'gurgling' sound when you eat or drink.



If you have these problems for a long time you might:



- Lose weight.



- Keep getting chest infections.



Sometimes swallowing problems can lead to other problems.



Some of these are very serious and you will need to get emergency medical help.



These problems are:

- Coughing or choking when food goes down 'the wrong way' so you can't breathe.



- A type of chest infection called 'aspiration pneumonia'. This happens if you breathe something into your airway like a small piece of food.



Warning signs that this has happened are:



A wet, gurgly voice when you eat and drink.



Coughing when you eat or drink.



Having problems breathing.



If you think this has happened call 111.



- Not eating or drinking enough because you are worried about choking – this can make you very ill.



- You might not want to go out because you are worried about eating and drinking.



If you have problems swallowing, or have any of these symptoms, see your doctor.



Your doctor will ask you questions. They may ask you to have some tests.



These tests will help to work out what is causing your problems.



The tests might be:

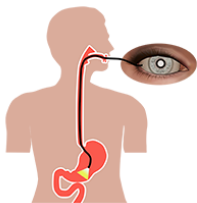
- A doctor watching you swallow water and food.



- Having an x-ray while you swallow water and food (this is called a videofluoroscopy).



- Having a thin tube with a light and a tiny camera put through your nose. A doctor can then look for anything blocking your throat (this is called a nasoendoscopy).



- Having a small tube put through your nose into your food pipe. A doctor can then see if acid is flowing back up from your stomach.

## Treatment And Care For Swallowing Problems



There are some different treatments for swallowing problems.



Your doctor will tell you which is the best treatment for you.



If your swallowing problems are caused by problems with your mouth or throat, treatments could be:

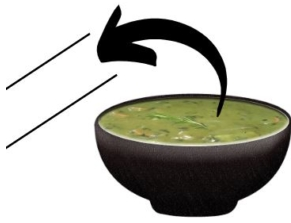


- Learning new ways to swallow – this is done by working with a speech and language therapist.

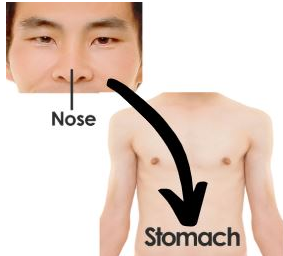


- Eating softer foods and having thick liquids to drink so that your food is safer to swallow.





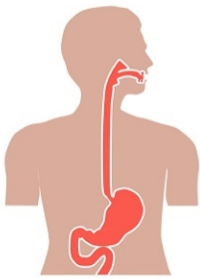
- Getting your food and drink through a tube. There are two different types of tube:



A tube which goes through your nose and down into your stomach.



A tube which goes straight into your stomach (called a PEG tube).



If your swallowing problems are caused by problems with your food pipe, treatments could be:



- Medicine.



- Having an operation to make your food pipe wider.