What you need to know

Dysphagia is the medical term for trouble swallowing. It is very common in patients with head and neck cancer. Cancer or cancer treatment can cause it. Dysphagia can be a short-term or a long-term problem. It can cause food or liquids to go the wrong way into the lungs. This guide will help you learn about the signs, symptoms, causes, and treatments for dysphagia.

What are the symptoms?

- Some people may not have any symptoms.
- Dysphagia can be painful, but usually it does not hurt.
- Coughing or throat clearing during or right after eating is the most common symptom.
- Feeling like you are choking when you eat or drink.
- Feeling like food is stuck in your throat or needing several tries to swallow one bite of food.
- Weak, wet, or gurgly voice or sounds during or right after eating.
- Runny nose or watery eyes when eating.
- Shortness of breath when eating.
- Spilling of food or liquid from the mouth while eating.
- Infection, such as pneumonia or bronchitis.
- Weight loss.

How can I get dysphagia?

- The cancer can compress your neck or mouth.
- Chemotherapy and radiation can cause
  - Infections that can make it painful and hard to swallow.
  - Swelling that makes it hard for food or fluids to pass through.
  - Inflammation of the mouth and throat that makes it hard to swallow.
  - Dry mouth that makes it hard to swallow.
- Surgery can damage the nerves and muscles that help you swallow.

How does a doctor diagnose dysphagia?

A doctor will listen to your symptoms. He or she will look for swelling, inflammation, or irritation in your mouth and throat. Doctors often order evaluations to diagnose dysphagia.

How can dysphagia be treated?

- You will be told the types of foods and liquids that are safe for you to swallow.
- Infection, dry mouth, swelling, and irritation can be treated with medication.
- If there is narrowing of the digestive tube, a tube can be put in to make it wider.
- When your throat muscles are not working well, therapy can help
  - Swallowing exercises may help strengthen the weak muscles. Some exercises may be done with the aid of electrical stimulation.
  - Swallowing positions: different positions help the food go down the right way. The most commonly used positions are (consult with a health care professional to pick the strategies that are right for you)
- Chin-down position: prevent the food from going to the lungs.
- Chin-up position: help the food go down the throat.
- Head turn: help the food go down the side of the throat that is not affected.
- Side-lying: lying toward the nonaffected side to help the food go down.

**Resources**


**Authorship**

This page was developed by Diana Molinares, MD, Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, University of Miami — Jackson Memorial Hospital, Miami, FL (e-mail address: Diana.molinaresmeji@jhsmiami.org); Sara Christensen Holz, MD, Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Madison, WI (e-mail address: ChristensenHolz@rehab.wisc.edu); and Tracey Wallace, MS, CCC-SLP, Shepherd Center, Atlanta, GA (e-mail address: Tracey_Wallace@shepherd.org).

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