

DYSPHAGIA AND ASPIRATION

A common problem for many of the people that we work with is dysphagia. **Dysphagia** is a word that describes any problem a person may have with swallowing. Swallowing problems can lead to aspiration. **Aspiration** describes a condition when food or fluids that should go into the stomach go into the lungs instead. Usually when this happens the person will cough in order to clear the food or fluid out of their lungs. However, sometimes the person does not cough at all. This is known as a “silent aspiration.” Frequent aspiration can cause damage to the lungs if it is not treated. There are several ways to tell if someone has dysphagia or aspiration problems. The person’s doctor will order tests that are best for each person.

Common signs of dysphagia and/or aspiration:

- Coughing before or after swallowing
- Much drooling, especially during meals
- Pocketing food inside the cheek
- Choking on certain foods, for example, white bread
- Nose running or sneezing during dining
- Trouble chewing
- Trouble swallowing certain types of fluids and foods
- Taking a very long time to finish a meal
- Refusals to eat certain foods or finish a meal
- A complaint of feeling like something is caught in the throat
- A gurgly voice during or after eating or drinking
- Much throat clearing after a meal
- Repeated episodes of choking, frequent colds, pneumonias, or “allergies”
- Unexplained weight loss
- Unexplained fevers that come and go
- Coughing when lying flat or sitting up quickly from a reclined position

Conditions that may lead to dysphagia and/or aspiration:

- Aging
- Poor dental alignment or missing teeth

- Seizures
- Decreased level of awareness
- Fatigue
- Some medications side effects that weaken ability to swallow
- Poor muscle function as in cerebral palsy
- Poor eating habits described as stuffing or rapid eating
- Some medical conditions
- Poor positioning or posture while eating

What Should You Do?

Call 911 if the person is:

- Blue, can’t talk or make a sound, or is not breathing (**Attempt Heimlich Maneuver**)
- Having difficulty breathing
- Looks very ill

If you think that there may be a problem with swallowing:

- Offer foods that the person seems to tolerate better.
- Have the person eat at a slow pace.
- Stop the meal if the symptoms worsen and report it to the nurse or your supervisor according to your agency’s policy.
- Document what you see.
- Tell other staff what you see.
- Tell the nurse or your supervisor what you see.
- Tell the doctor what you see.

If a person has tests that show they have trouble swallowing, the doctor will tell you what you need to do. You must do exactly what the doctor tells you to do or you may cause harm to the person.

