

EATING, DRINKING AND SWALLOWING DIFFICULTIES (DYSPHAGIA)

You have received this information because you have been assessed as having an eating, drinking or swallowing difficulty (dysphagia), by a Speech & Language Therapist.

This leaflet will accompany any advice or information given to you by your Speech & Language Therapist, following your assessment.





What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is a difficulty with eating, drinking and swallowing. It is pronounced *dis-fay-jah*.

Who does it affect?

Swallowing difficulties can occur as a result of other conditions such as:

- Stroke
- Dementia
- Parkinson's
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Motor Neurone Disease
- Brain Injury
- Some types of cancer
- Some surgeries, especially to the mouth or throat
- Some chest or breathing problems

Eating, drinking and swallowing problems can affect people of all ages. Some people may find it hard to swallow certain foods or drinks, while others may be unable to swallow at all.



What are the signs of an eating, drinking or swallowing problem?

You may experience:

- **Coughing or choking** during or after eating and drinking
- **A change** in how your **voice sounds** e.g. 'gurgly' or 'wet' voice when eating or drinking
- **A change** in your **breathing** e.g. sounding wheezy, shortness of breath or gasping for air when eating or drinking
- **Experiencing pain or tiredness or needing lots of effort** to swallow
- **Food left behind** in your mouth after eating
- Having **lots of chest infections** when you do not have a cold
- **Avoiding** certain **food or drinks** that you find hard to swallow
- Some people have **eating habits that may increase their risk such** as eating or drinking very quickly, **overfilling the mouth, not chewing food or holding food in the mouth**, which can lead to an increased risk of choking.
- Others may become **distracted, lose concentration or take less care** when eating or drinking if their surroundings are **noisy, interrupted or cluttered**. This can also increase their risk of choking.



How can an eating, drinking and swallowing problem affect my health?

There is an increased risk of other serious health problems if a swallowing difficulty is untreated, such as:

- Choking
- Aspiration (when food/drinks or other materials enter the lungs they can cause chest infections or aspiration pneumonia)
- Dehydration from drinking less
- Poor nutrition from eating less, which may lead to weight loss

Difficulty swallowing can change the way you enjoy life. However, with help and support from the right healthcare professionals* you can **live well with swallowing difficulties while enjoying food and drinks that are safe and healthy for you.**

Who can help if I have an eating, drinking and swallowing problem?

- **You can help yourself by:**
 - Following the advice you have been given
 - **Telling your Speech & Language Therapist, a Doctor or any healthcare professional* if your swallow has changed**
 - Keeping your mouth clean with regular brushing, flossing and regular cleaning of dentures
 - Eating a healthy balanced diet
- A **Speech and Language Therapist** can assess, diagnose and help you to manage your swallowing difficulty.
- A **Dietitian** can give advice if your swallowing difficulty is affecting your ability to eat or drink what you need.
- A **Physiotherapist** can help if you have difficulty getting into the right position to eat and drink. They may also help if you have a chest condition related to your swallowing difficulty.

- An **Occupational Therapist** can advise on specialist seating to help you sit in the best position for eating and drinking if this is difficult for you.
- A **Pharmacist** can provide advice if medication is hard to swallow. Never cut or crush tablets, open capsules or thicken medicines without advice from your pharmacist or GP.
- A **carer or family member** may help by preparing your food or drinks and may support you to eat and drink if needed.
- If you have concerns about your health related to your swallowing speak to your **GP or healthcare professional***.

What happens after a Speech & Language Therapist has assessed your swallowing?

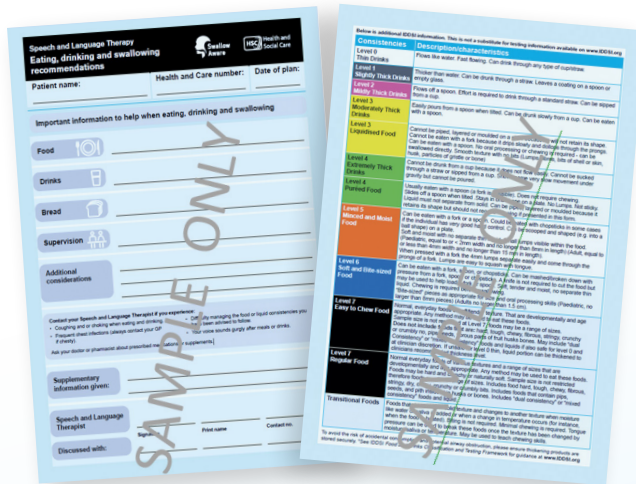
You may be advised about the following:

1. Swallowing exercises to help with recovery of your swallow.
2. Recommended changes to the consistency of your food and/or thickness of your drinks to make them easier and safer to swallow.
3. The use of specialist cups or equipment; how you should sit when eating and drinking (posture); changes to the environment around you to help you swallow as safely as possible.
4. With the support of your pharmacist or doctor you may need to make changes to your medications, if they become hard to swallow.
5. You will have to look out for certain signs of eating drinking and swallowing difficulties to avoid other health problems developing e.g. dehydration, chest infections.



Understanding the Speech & Language Therapy Recommendations for Eating, Drinking and Swallowing Sheet

Once the Speech & Language Therapist has assessed your swallow, they will provide you with an eating, drinking and swallowing recommendations sheet.



Speech and Language Therapy Eating, drinking and swallowing recommendations

Health and Care number: _____ Date of plan: _____

Important information to help when eating, drinking and swallowing

Food _____

Drinks _____

Bread _____

Supervision _____

Additional considerations _____

Supplementary information given: _____

Speech and Language Therapist _____

Discussed with: _____

Level 1 (Easiest) - Level 10 (Most Difficult)

This important document will help you and all the people involved in your care to manage your eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties and understand your needs.

It will outline the best advice to manage your eating, drinking and swallowing needs as safely as possible for:

- **Food/Drinks/Bread**
- **The level of supervision or assistance you may need to eat and drink safely**
- **Having someone present while you are eating/drinking**
- **Any other advice specific to your eating/drinking needs**

The changes made to the texture of food or thickness of drinks are described using "IDDSI" Levels. Each level has a number, a colour and a short description. Your Speech & Language Therapist will provide more information about the specific IDDSI levels recommended for you.

To reduce your risk of choking, you should follow the advice set out in your eating, drinking and swallowing recommendations sheet for all food, drinks and snacks.

It is important that your recommendations for eating drinking and swallowing, are shared with everyone involved in your care so they understand and can support your needs.

Remember to bring it with you if you:

- Go into hospital/go home from hospital
- Move to another ward, hospital or care setting
- Attend a day care centre

It should always be shared with carers who help at home.

If you find it difficult to follow the advice or become unhappy with the recommendations, speak to your Speech & Language Therapist.

Information for the family and those providing care:

- **Before Food and Drink, STOP and THINK!**
- Always check with a staff member or the Speech & Language Therapist to ensure your relative/friend can take food/drinks or snacks safely.
- Follow the information outlined on the eating, drinking and swallowing recommendations sheet for all food, drinks and snacks.
- If you want to bring or send food for your relative/friend, always check with the Speech & Language Therapist/healthcare professional* to make sure it is in line with the person's eating, drinking and swallowing recommendations.
- Offering food or drinks which are not in keeping with their recommendations may put the person with a swallowing difficulty at risk of choking or developing a chest infection.
- If your relative/friend attends a day centre/has a new carer at home/attends short breaks or respite it is important their recommendations for eating, drinking and swallowing are shared with everyone involved in their care.
- Contact the Speech and Language Therapist to discuss any questions you may have or if you notice any improvement or deterioration in how your relative/friend is eating, drinking or swallowing.

To contact your Speech & Language Therapist or a Healthcare Professional* if you notice any change in your eating, drinking or swallowing or if you have any concerns, see below for details:

YOUR LOCAL SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPY TEAM:

Location: _____

Contact Number: _____

*A healthcare professional can be a doctor, nurse or an Allied Health Professional such as a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or dietitian.



Where can I find more information?

You can learn more about eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties from the following:

The Public Health Agency NI Dysphagia Homepage

[Dysphagia HSC Public Health Agency \(https://bit.ly/3PWVHTH\)](https://bit.ly/3PWVHTH)

[Eating, Drinking & Swallowing Difficulty video](#)



[Help stop choking video](#)



[Signs of Swallowing Difficulty Checklist](#)



The International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI)

- [IDDSI \(https://iddsi.org/\)](https://iddsi.org/) - More information about the IDDSI levels used to describe changes to food texture and thickness of drinks. A free IDDSI app is also available to download.



Swallow Awareness E-learning

- Free, online Swallow Awareness training to help you and your family understand and manage your condition. You can sign up for the training on the Health Education E-learning website such as sections titled Dysphagia Essentials and Resources:

[Dysphagia - E-Learning for Healthcare \(e-lfh.org.uk\)](https://e-lfh.org.uk/)







Easy Read Version available



Audio version available



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