

# Treatment for Aspiration from Dysphagia



Aspiration is when something enters your airway or lungs by accident. It may be food, liquid, or some other material. This can cause serious health problems, such as pneumonia. Aspiration can happen when you have trouble swallowing normally. This is called dysphagia.

## Types of treatment

Your healthcare provider will try to treat the cause of your dysphagia. The type of treatment will depend on what caused your dysphagia. Treatment may include medicines, surgery, or referral to a speech or swallowing specialist (speech-language pathologist or SLP).

You may also need to manage the symptoms of dysphagia. This may include doing things, such as:

- Changing your diet. You may need to make liquids thicker or not have liquids.
- Changing your position while eating. For example, you may need to eat sitting upright, tilt your head back, or bend your head forward.
- Not eating in bed
- Eating smaller bites of food
- Eating with someone watching you
- Not talking while eating
- Not being distracted during meals
- Eating when you are most alert
- Using tools, such as straws
- Doing exercises to strengthen your lips and tongue
- Using special swallowing methods

As you recover, you may need to use fewer of these methods. Dysphagia after a stroke may improve greatly over time.

You may still be at high risk for aspiration even with these methods. If this is the case, you may need to use a feeding tube for a period of time to prevent aspiration.

## What happens if you don't get treated?

A major complication of aspiration is harm to the lungs. When food, drink, or stomach contents make their way into your lungs, they can damage the tissues or cause severe infection. Aspiration also raises your risk for pneumonia. This is a lung infection that causes fluid to build up in the lungs. Pneumonia needs to be treated with antibiotics. In severe cases, it may cause death.

Other possible complications from dysphagia include:

- Fluid loss (dehydration)
- Malnutrition
- Weight loss

- Increased risk for other illness

These problems can reduce your level of independence. They may also cause or lengthen a stay in the hospital.

## Preventing aspiration from dysphagia

You can help prevent aspiration by:

- Taking good care of your mouth and teeth
- Getting dental treatment, such as dentures, when needed
- Taking medicines as advised
- Stopping smoking and heavy alcohol consumption
- Using good posture when eating and drinking
- Doing oral exercises as advised by the speech-language pathologist (SLP)
- Making changes to your diet as advised by the SLP
- Asking your healthcare provider for other advice to prevent aspiration in your case

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