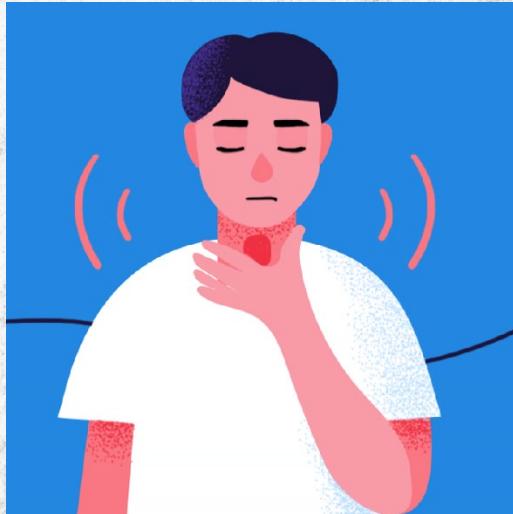


Difficulty of swallowing (Dysphagia):



Most people take swallowing for granted; however, it is a complicated process. For swallowing to take place normally, the brain must unconsciously coordinate the activity of numerous small muscles of the throat and the esophagus. These muscles must contract and in the proper sequence to push food from the mouth to the back of the throat and then down the esophagus. Finally, the lower part of the esophagus must relax to allow food to enter the stomach. Thus, swallowing difficulty can result from the following:

- Disorders of the brain or nervous system
- Disorders of the muscles in general
- Disorders of the esophagus (a physical blockage or a motility disorder)

How to know if you have a problem:

In people with dysphagia, certain symptoms and characteristics are cause for concern. They include



- Symptoms of a complete physical blockage (such as drooling or inability to swallow anything at all)
- Dysphagia resulting in weight loss
- Painful swallowing (odynophagia)
- A new problem in nerve, spinal cord, or brain function, particularly any weakness
- Recurring aspiration pneumonia (lung infection caused by inhaling mouth secretions, stomach contents, or both)

Prevention:

- **Changing your eating habits.** Cut your food into smaller pieces, chew food thoroughly and eat more slowly.
- **Trying foods with different textures to see if some cause you more trouble.** Thin liquids, such as coffee and juice, are a problem for some people, and sticky foods, such as peanut butter or caramel, can make swallowing difficult. Avoid foods that cause you trouble.
- **Limiting alcohol and caffeine.** These can dry your mouth and throat, making swallowing more difficult.

