

# Dysphagia in Adults

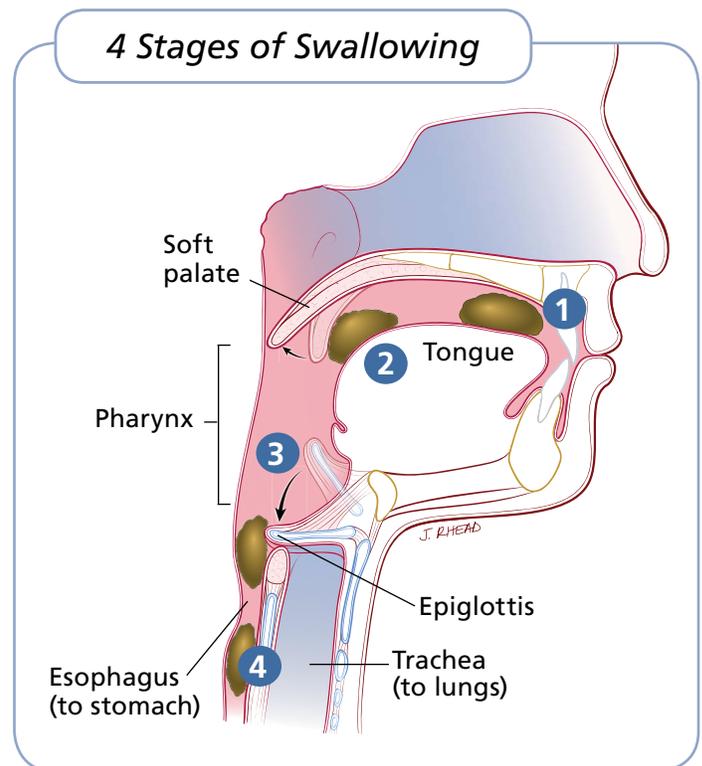
**Dysphagia** [diss-FAY-jah] is when food does not move safely from the mouth to the stomach. When that happens, a person may swallow food into the lungs. This can cause infection, respiratory problems, and other medical problems. Dysphagia can cause long-term health or eating problems if it is not treated.

When a person swallows, there are 4 stages (see illustration to the right). Dysphagia occurs when any of these stages do **NOT** happen:

- 1** You see the food and produce saliva. The food is then mixed by chewing the food, and it forms a ball called a **bolus** [BOW-luss].
- 2** The tongue moves the bolus to the back of your mouth.
- 3** The soft palate pushes up, and the bolus enters the **pharynx** [FAIR-inks], or upper throat. A small flap, called the **epiglottis** [ep-ih-GLOTT-uhs], closes off the airway — your **trachea** [TREY-kee-uh]. This keeps the food from going into the lungs.
- 4** The bolus then moves down the **esophagus** [ih-SOF-uh-guhs] to the stomach.

## What causes dysphagia?

Frequent causes of dysphagia include muscle weakness, neurological diseases (such as Parkinson's disease or stroke) or brain injury. It can also be caused by congenital problems or surgeries in the mouth or throat.



## What are warnings signs of dysphagia?

There are several warning signs of dysphagia. Usually, a person will experience one or more of the following:

- Weak or slow swallow.
- Poor response when the mouth is stimulated.
- A lot of drooling.
- Coughing or choking when eating or drinking.
- Weak cough.
- Frequent respiratory illnesses including pneumonia.
- After swallowing, there is still food in the mouth.
- A “wet” or gurgly voice.
- Vomiting or reflux of liquids and solids.
- Refusing to eat or drink.

## How is dysphagia diagnosed?

Three types of studies are used to diagnose dysphagia:

- **Clinical Feeding Evaluation** — A specialist will discuss your eating habits with you, look at your mouth and face, and watch you eat or be fed a variety of foods (depending on ability to eat and any medical conditions). You or a caregiver may bring food from home, if you want, for this study. By watching you eat, the specialist can learn about your mouth function, mental alertness, control of your body, and general ability to eat.
- **Modified Barium Swallow Study (MBS)** — Conducted in a hospital x-ray department, an MBS involves having a video x-ray done while swallowing small amounts of thin liquid, thick liquid, or solid food (depending on ability to swallow). The liquid and food contains some barium, a metal that can be seen with x-rays, which lets the doctor see the food on the x-ray.
- **Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES)** — Done in an outpatient clinic or an endoscopy room, this study involves having a small tube with a camera passed through your nose until the doctor can see the back of your throat on the camera. Then, you will eat or drink while the camera records your swallowing. This study helps the doctor and therapists learn more about your mouth movement skills, swallowing pattern, how the food moves into the esophagus, and if the food goes by your airway safely.

## How is dysphagia treated?

Various professionals work with people who have dysphagia. This may include a speech language pathologist (SLP), an occupational therapist, a gastroenterologist, and a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN). For instance, the modified barium swallow studies are completed with an SLP and a doctor who can read x-ray videos.

The goal of dysphagia treatment is to find the safest, most efficient, and most enjoyable way for you to eat. Dysphagia treatment will help you swallow safely and be less likely to swallow food into your lungs. With treatment, eating can be more pleasurable.

Treatments may include:

- Sitting in positions when eating that make up for weakness
- Following diets that include safe liquids and foods
- Using safe-swallowing methods (training for you and your caregivers)
- Learning to eat varied liquids and foods
- Allowing a period of waiting for you to increase overall strength and endurance
- Doing exercises to strengthen the neck and facial muscles that help you swallow



**Questions for my doctor:** \_\_\_\_\_

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