

Primary Care Adult dysphagia pathway

What is dysphagia?

- Dysphagia is the word used to describe difficulties when eating, drinking or swallowing.
- Dysphagia can be very serious and cause chest infections and pneumonia, weight loss, malnutrition and dehydration.
- Dysphagia should not be ignored.



Primary Care - Adult dysphagia pathway

Risk factors

- Stroke
- Acquired /traumatic brain injury
- Cardiac difficulties
- Gastroesophageal difficulties/reflux
- Known diagnoses, e.g. Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy
- Craniofacial issues
- Airway/respiratory difficulties
- Tracheostomy
- Burns
- Dementia
- Progressive conditions, e.g. motor neurone disease
- Parkinson's
- Change in health/mental health
- Transitions
- Medication changes/side effects
- Changes in seizure activity
- Postural changes
- Poor oral hygiene/health
- Changes in dentition
- Changes in living conditions/care provider/staffing
- Multiple settings in which care is provided
- Unsafe eating behaviours
- Aging & frailty
- Limited carer awareness/support

Possible symptoms - during and/or immediately after food and drink

- Gagging
- Coughing
- Choking
- Watery eyes
- Facial colour change
- Wet voice quality
- Wet breath sounds
- Chestiness/lower respiratory tract infection/recurrence
- Refusal/distress
- Self-report of struggle
- Poor weight gain/loss
- Carer concern
- Loss of food from mouth, taking a long time to eat a meal
- Coughing when or immediately after eating or drinking

Dysphagia suspected
EXCLUDE CANCER

Suspected Cancer referral form

Refer directly to appropriate Adult Speech and Language Therapy Service (SALT) for assessment

Clinical team to consider

Advise/educate/connect individual and/or carers to information, resources and support
[Oral health | NHS England | Workforce, training and education](#)
[Dysphagia \(swallowing difficulties\) | Disability charity Scope UK](#)

Nutrition and hydration

- Refer to Community Dietitian
- Consider information here [Nutrition and hydration and the MDT - British Dietetic Association \(BDA\) iss-healthcare-implementation-of-iddsi.pdf](#)

Medication review

- Consider anticholinergics, antiepileptics, antidepressants, antiplatelets, NSAIDS, antipsychotics as a cause of dry mouth or swallowing difficulty

Review of previous support and care plans eg SALT care plan

Medical considerations

- Consider gastro-oesophageal reflux GORD
- <https://patient.info/news-and-features/diet-sheet-for-oesophageal-reflux>
<https://patient.info/digestive-health/acid-reflux-and-oesophagitis>
- Consider Gastroenterology referral/ non urgent endoscopy
- Consideration of need for non-enteral feeding
- Respiratory referral re prophylaxis recurrent chest infection
- Neurology referral
- Consider ENT cause

Management of unexplained/unexpected weight loss

Obesity management, lifestyle advice, smoking/ alcohol cessation

Involvement of/collaboration with Individual, family and carers Community learning disability teams, liaison teams, Multidisciplinary community team

- capacity, consent and communication needs
- Posture

Collaborative development of support plan, review of care plan in context of any changes to circumstance, ensuring least restrictive reasonable adjustments to diet to manage safer swallowing, safer environment for eating, reduced risk from eating and drinking, and reduced risk of choking whilst maximising pleasure.

Dysphagia Screening Questions

In addition it is very useful for differential diagnosis to know if the person has a degenerative condition and if reflux is a factor for this person.

Question	Record answers
Do you have difficulties with swallowing food or drink? (Prompts: pain, struggle, effort, refusal, distress, agitation, food getting stuck)	
Have you had a choking incident in the last 12 months? (Prompts: something got stuck in your throat and you had to cough very hard to get it out, or you needed help, eg back slaps)	
Do you regularly cough during or after eating or drinking?	
Do you get regular chest infections? (Prompt: more than 2 chest infections in the last 6 months)	
Do difficulties with eating and drinking impact on your quality of life?	
Have you lost weight without meaning to, or do you have a low weight? (Prompt: low BMI)	
Do you find it a problem getting enough to drink (Prompt: reduced mobility, dexterity etc and needing help with ADL or history recurrent urine infections)	
Have you already received any advice for your eating and drinking difficulty?	