

Dementia-Related Swallowing Problems

by Lynne Grip

Eating is a process most of us take for granted. We may worry we're not eating the right foods, but generally we don't even think about the steps of the process—specifically chewing and swallowing—because they come so naturally. However, that can change with age, especially for people with a diagnosis of dementia.

Dysphagia and Aspiration

Dysphagia is the medical term for difficulty swallowing. Normal wear and tear of the esophagus, weakening of mouth and throat muscles, and decrease in the amount of saliva all contribute to dysphagia. Dentures or dental health problems and acid reflux disease can also lead to a narrowing or stricture of the esophagus that makes swallowing difficult.

According to the National Institutes of Health, swallowing problems occur in about 45 percent of people diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. The number goes up to 85 percent for people with advanced dementia living in residential care communities.

As dementia progresses, the area of the brain that controls swallowing is adversely affected, and the risk of choking or aspiration increases. Aspiration while eating is when food or fluids "go down the wrong tube" and enter the airway or lungs accidentally. Aspiration pneumonia may result and can be a serious medical event.

Some Solutions

There are a number of measures that can be taken to help reduce problems related to dysphagia.

- Have a speech and language pathologist do an evaluation to identify the degree of impairment. These professionals can make recommendations for texture and consistency of food (such as soft or pureed) and fluids (such as thickened liquids) to promote a safe oral intake.
- Sitting in a comfortable, upright position (preferably out of bed) is recommended while eating and for about 30 minutes afterward.
- Minimize environmental distractions during mealtime.
- Alternate small bites of food with sips of fluid and allow plenty of time in between bites and sips.
- Eat six small meals a day rather than three large meals.
- Ensure proper oral care and comfortable dentures.
- Use [adaptive tools](#) and finger foods as indicated.
- Provide verbal prompts such as "open your mouth," "chew," and "swallow" as needed.
- Make mealtimes pleasant by chatting calmly and playing relaxing music.

Resources:

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/daily-living/eating-motor-and-sensory-difficulties>

<https://www.alzheimersonline.org/page/about-us/whats-on/blog/recognising-and-managing-swallowing-difficulties-for-people-with-dementia/>

<https://swallowingdisorderfoundation.com/caregivers-guide-dysphagia-dementia/>