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Feeding and Swallowing Problems in Children



What is a swallowing disorder?

- A swallowing disorder is also called dysphagia.
- The three phases of swallowing are the oral, pharyngeal, and esophageal phases.
- Your child can have a problem during one or more of these phases.
- Your child can also have feeding problems.



What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

- Oral phase problems include
 - trouble sucking from a bottle or breast
 - problems coordinating the suck-swallow-breathe cycle
 - problems closing the lips to get food from a spoon or fork or to keep food in the mouth
 - trouble chewing or moving food and liquid from the mouth to the throat



What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

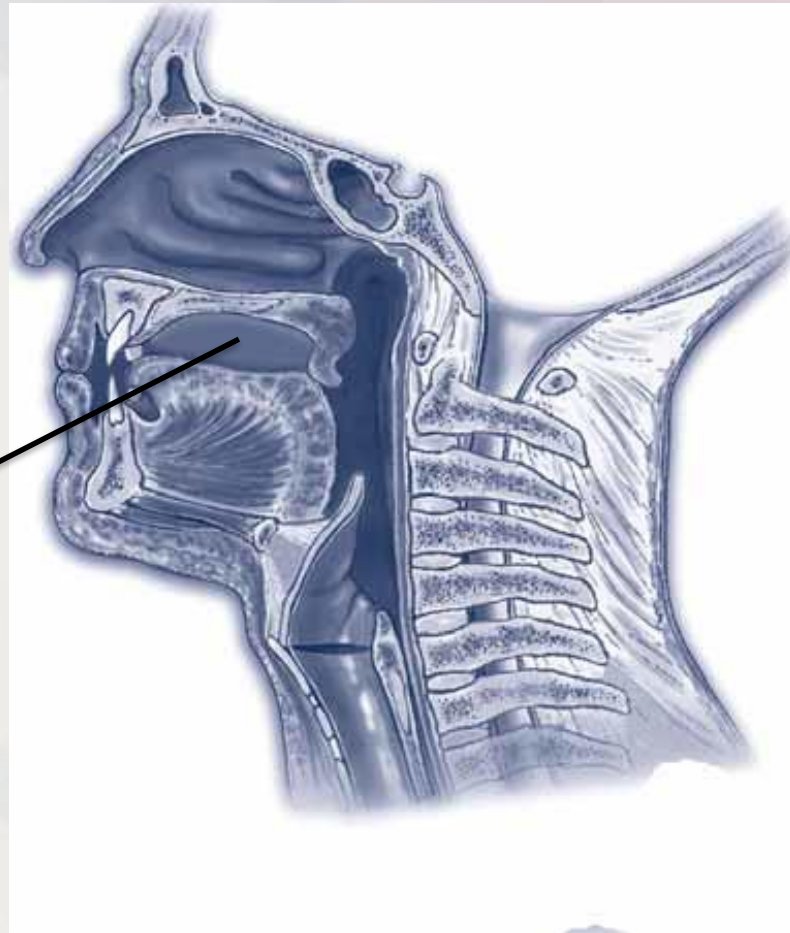
- Oral phase problems include
 - not being able to control the food or liquid so that it goes into the throat too quickly
 - having some food left in the mouth after the swallow, called residue
 - getting food stuck in the cheek, called pocketing



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Oral Phase (Adult model for illustrative purposes)

Bolus





What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

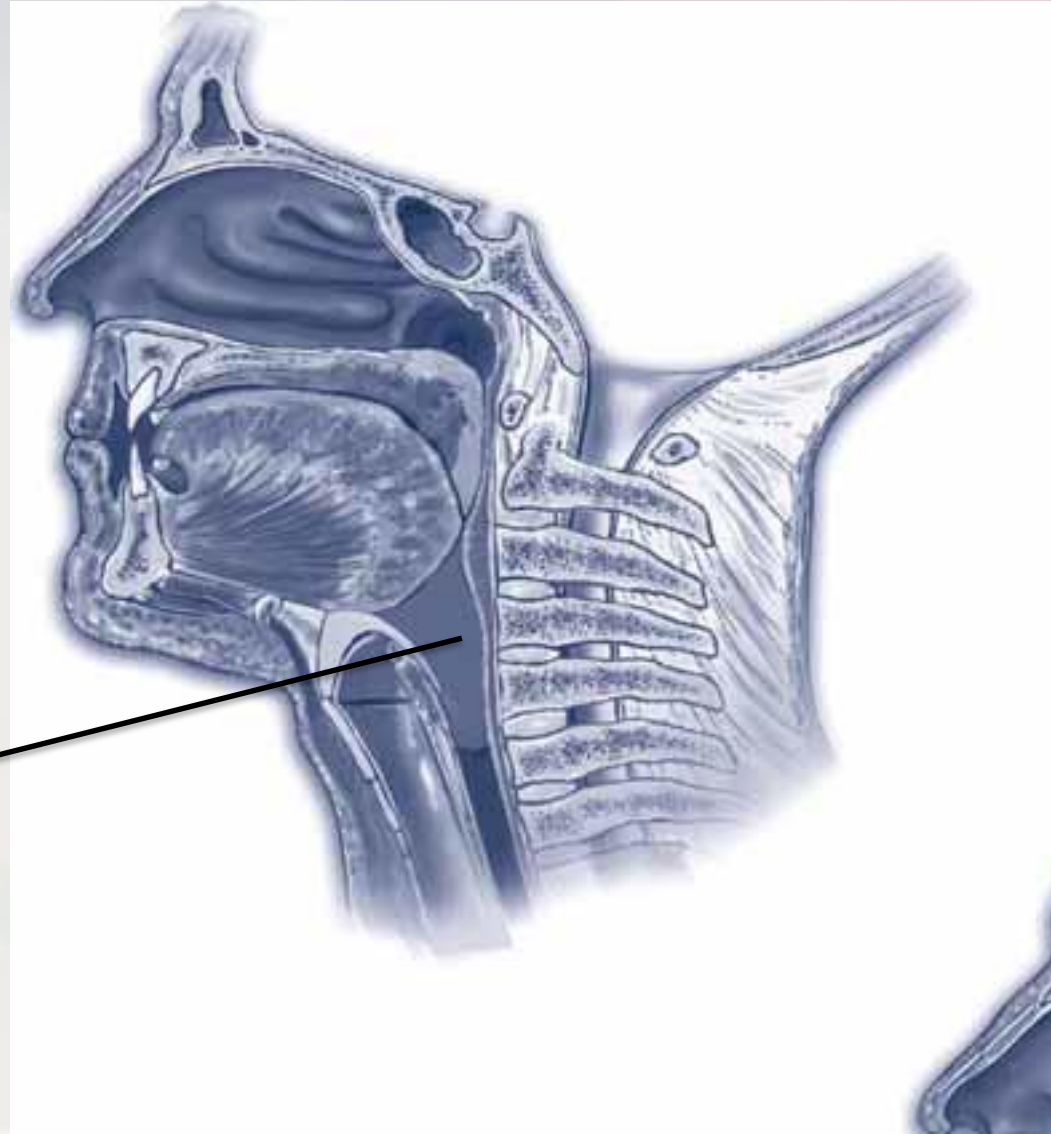
- Pharyngeal phase problems include
 - having a hard time starting a swallow
 - getting food or liquid into the airway, called aspiration
 - having some food or liquid stay in the throat after the swallow, called residue



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Pharyngeal Phase

(Adult model for illustrative purposes)



Bolus



What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

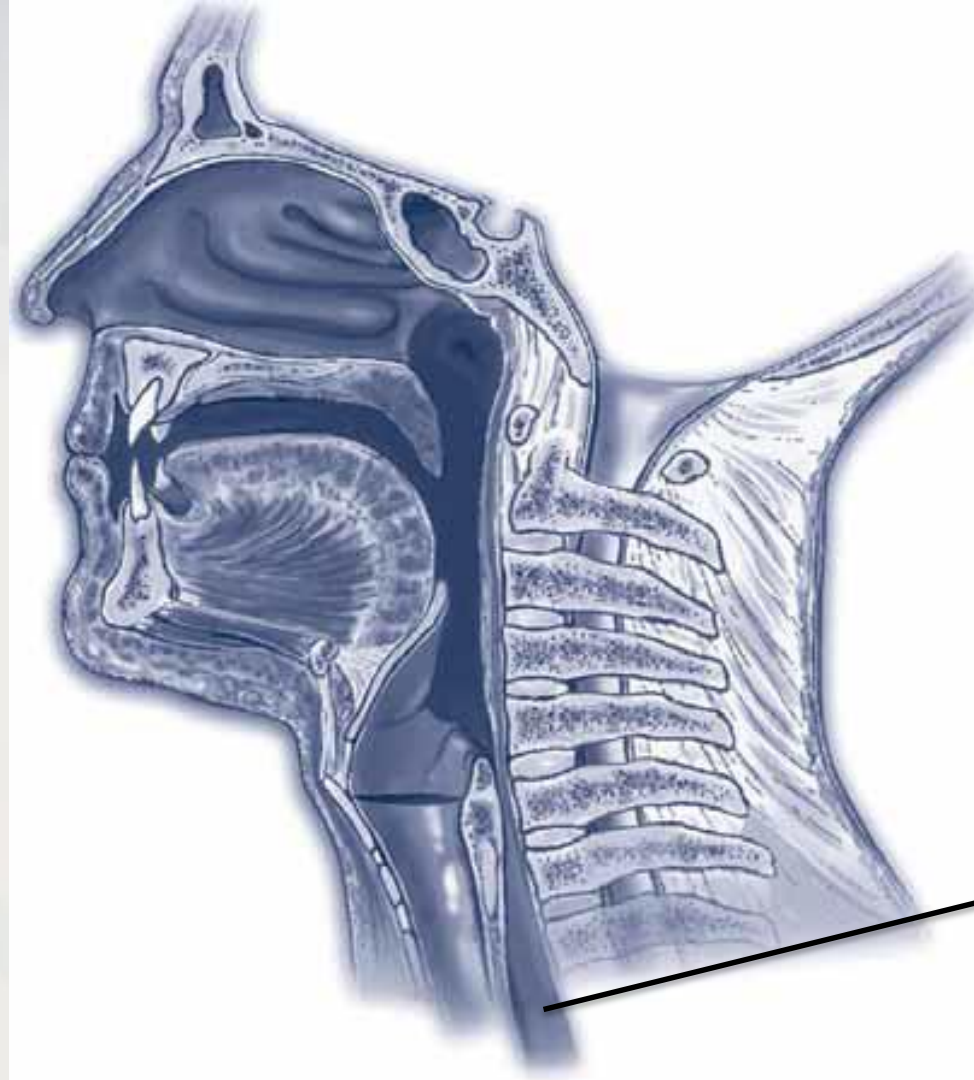
- Esophageal phase problems include
 - food getting stuck as it moves from the throat into the esophagus
 - poor movement of the esophagus so food doesn't pass easily into the stomach
 - food coming back up, called reflux
 - pockets in the esophagus that catch food and don't let it go into the stomach



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Esophageal Phase

(Adult model for illustrative purposes)



Bolus



What is a feeding disorder?

- Your child may have trouble eating with his or her hands or from a spoon or fork.
- Your child may also
 - refuse certain foods, like crunchy or smooth foods
 - eat only certain foods, like french fries or pizza
 - gag easily when food is brought near the mouth
 - have trouble paying attention long enough to eat a meal
 - take a long time to eat – more than 30 minutes



What causes feeding and swallowing problems?

- In children, some causes are
 - problems with the nervous system from cerebral palsy or other disorders
 - gastrointestinal problems, like reflux
 - premature birth and low birth weight
 - heart problems
 - cleft lip or palate
 - breathing problems
 - developmental disorders, like autism or Down syndrome



What are the signs of feeding and swallowing problems?

- Your child may
 - Arch his or her back or stiffen up while feeding
 - become irritable or fall asleep while feeding
 - take a long time to eat (more than 30 minutes)
 - refuse different food textures (like crunchy or smooth foods)
 - drool or spill food or liquid from the mouth



What are the signs of feeding and swallowing problems? (continued)

- Your child may
 - sound gurgly or out of breath after eating
 - cough or gag during meals
 - get pneumonia or respiratory infections a lot
 - spit up or vomit after eating
 - not gain weight



What can happen if my child has a feeding or swallowing problem?

Children need food to grow and develop. A child who has trouble eating may

- not get enough food and water to stay healthy
- not grow the way he or she should
- be at risk for food going into the airway, called aspiration
- get pneumonia or respiratory infections
- not like to eat in front of others



What help is available?

- You should talk with your child's doctor if you have concerns about how he or she is eating.
- A speech-language pathologist, or SLP, can test your child to see what kinds of problems he or she is having.
- The SLP can work with you and your child to find ways to make eating more enjoyable and safe.



How can an SLP help my child?

- The SLP may
 - talk to you about what problems your child is having and what he or she does well
 - talk with your child’s doctor about any medical problems
 - see how your child can move the muscles of his or her mouth
 - watch your child eat and drink
 - do other tests to see what is happening when your child swallows



How can an SLP help my child? (continued)

- Treatment will be different for every child and may include
 - exercises to help your child move his or her mouth better for chewing and swallowing
 - getting your child to try different positions for eating
 - getting your child to try different foods
 - trying different food textures, bottles, cups, spoons, or
 - other techniques to help your child eat safely



What can I do to help?

- As parents and caregivers you can help by
 - asking questions to make sure that you understand what kinds of problems your child is having
 - make sure you understand the treatment plan
 - go to therapy with your child and follow up at home with any recommendations
 - talk with your child's daycare or school teachers about your child's feeding and swallowing and what they can do to help



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How can I find an SLP?

- Look for an SLP with the Certificate of Clinical Competence from ASHA.
- The SLP will have “CCC-SLP” after his or her name.
- Go to the ASHA Web site at www.asha.org and click on “Find a Professional” at the top of the page.
- Call ASHA at (800) 638-8255 or e-mail actioncenter@asha.org



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For more information

- To learn more about feeding and swallowing problems and what SLPs do, go to ASHA's Web site at www.asha.org/public.