Swallowing Problems in Adults
What happens when we swallow?

• Once we put food or liquid into our mouths, we have to chew it and move it around so that it is ready to be swallowed.
• When it is ready, we start to swallow and the food or liquid goes down into our throats.
• We have to close off our airway so that the food or liquid won’t go down into our lungs.
• The food and liquid moves through our throat into our esophagus, which is the tube that goes into our stomach.
What is a swallowing disorder?

• A swallowing disorder is also called dysphagia.
• The three phases of swallowing are the oral, pharyngeal, and esophageal phases.
• You can have a problem during one or more of these phases.
What is a swallowing disorder?
(continued)

• Oral phase problems include
  – trouble closing your lips to get food from a spoon or fork or to keep food in your mouth
  – trouble chewing or moving food and liquid from your mouth to your throat
  – not being able to control the food or liquid so that it goes into your throat too quickly
  – having some food in your mouth after you’ve swallowed, called residue
  – getting food stuck in your cheek, called pocketing
Oral Phase

Bolus
What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

• Pharyngeal phase problems include
  – having a hard time starting a swallow
  – getting food or liquid into your airway, called aspiration
  – having some food or liquid stay in your throat after you’ve swallowed, called residue
Pharyngeal Phase

Bolus
What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

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

• Anything that causes problems with the head and neck or the nerves that go to the mouth or throat can lead to swallowing problems. This includes
  – stroke, brain injury, or spinal cord injury
  – diseases like multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also called ALS
  – dementia
  – head and neck cancer
  – injuries to your head or neck
  – being weak from illness or injury
What are the signs of a swallowing problem?

• You may
  – cough or choke when you eat
  – need extra time or effort to eat
  – drool or spill food from your mouth
  – have a wet or gurgly sounding voice after you swallow
  – get pneumonia a lot or sound congested after you eat
  – lose weight when you don’t mean to
What can happen if I have a swallowing problem?

• If you have trouble swallowing, you may
  – lose weight or become dehydrated
  – get food into your airway or lungs, called aspiration
  – get sick with pneumonia
  – no longer enjoy eating or drinking
  – become embarrassed because you have trouble eating or drinking
What help is available?

• You should see your doctor if you are having trouble swallowing to find out what might be causing your problems.

• A speech-language pathologist, or SLP, works with people who have swallowing problems.

• SLPs work in hospitals, rehabilitation hospitals, nursing homes, clinics, and private practice and may even come to your home.
How can SLPs help?

- The SLP will
  - talk with you about the problems you are having
  - see how well your mouth muscles work
  - watch how you swallow different foods and liquids
  - possibly do other tests to see how you swallow
How can SLPs help? (continued)

• The test done in the x-ray department is called videofluoroscopy or a modified barium swallow (MBS).
• The test done by putting a tube down your throat is called endoscopy or FEES®.
How can SLPs help? (continued)

• Treatment will depend on the problems you are having.
• The SLP may ask you to
  – try different head and mouth positions to help you swallow safely
  – do exercises to help your swallowing muscles work better
  – try different types of foods and liquids to see what is easiest for you to eat
• The SLP may suggest that you see other doctors to find out why you are having trouble.
What can family members and caregivers do to help?

• Ask questions so that you understand the problem and recommended treatment.
• Help the person by
  – doing the exercises with them
  – reminding them of positions or strategies they should use
  – preparing the right food and drinks for them
  – keeping track of how much they are eating and drinking
How can I find an SLP?

• Look for an SLP with the Certificate of Clinical Competence from ASHA
  – Will have “CCC-SLP” after his or her name.
• Go to ASHA’s Web site at www.asha.org and click on “Find a Professional” at the top of the page.
• Call ASHA at (800) 638-855 or e-mail actioncenter@asha.org.
For more information

• To learn more about swallowing problems and what SLPs do, go to the ASHA Web site, www.asha.org/public.