



ASHA /

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.



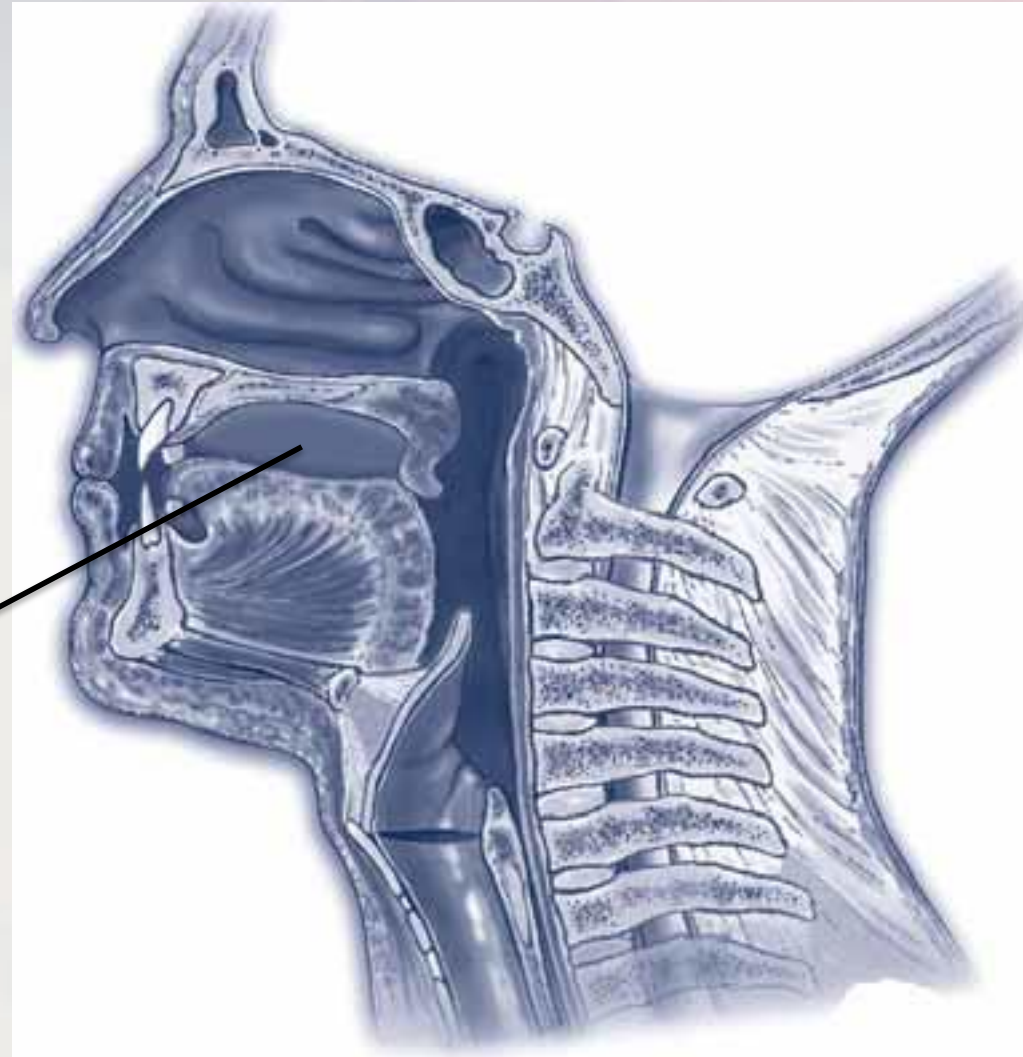
What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

- 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



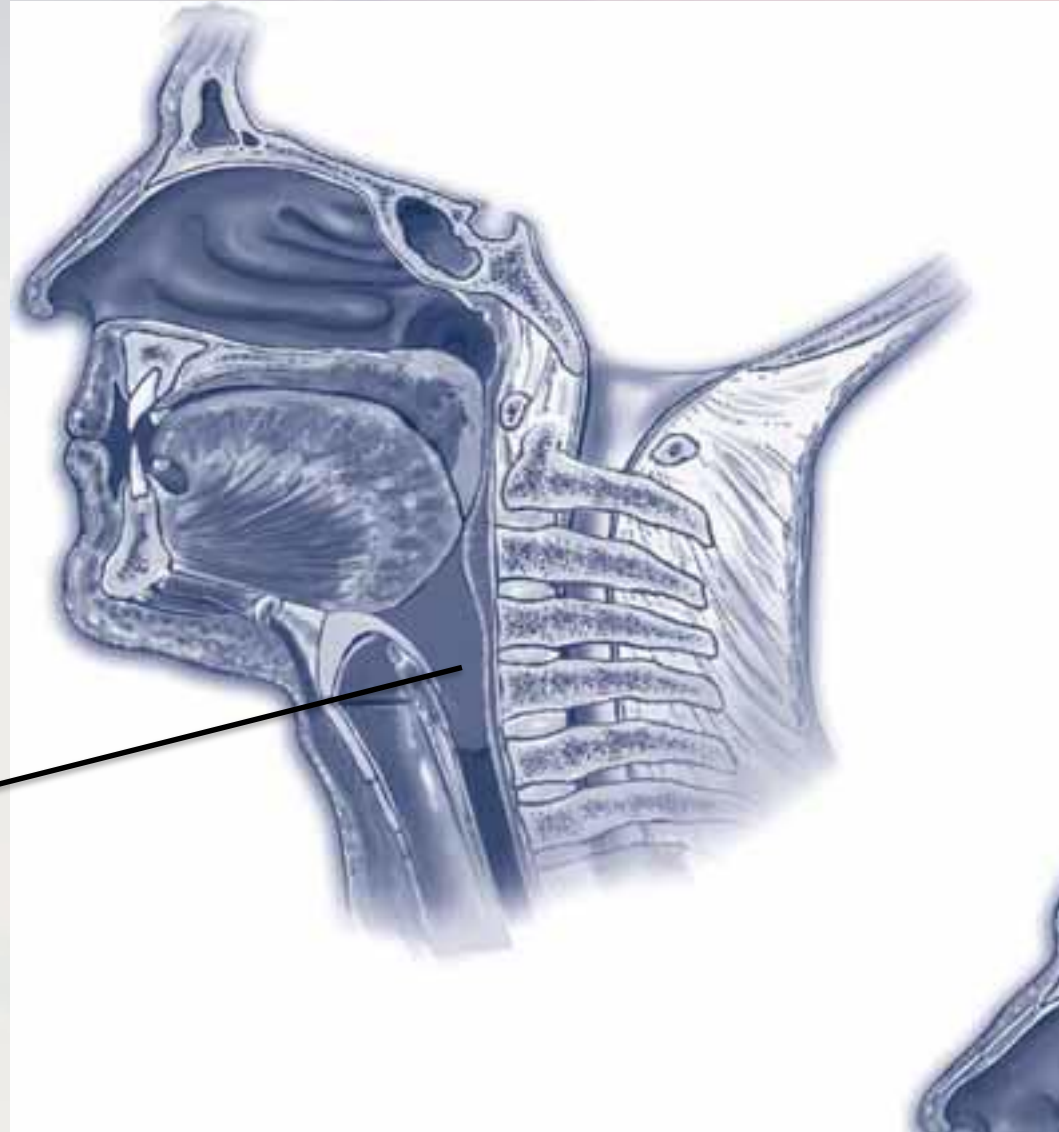


What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

- 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

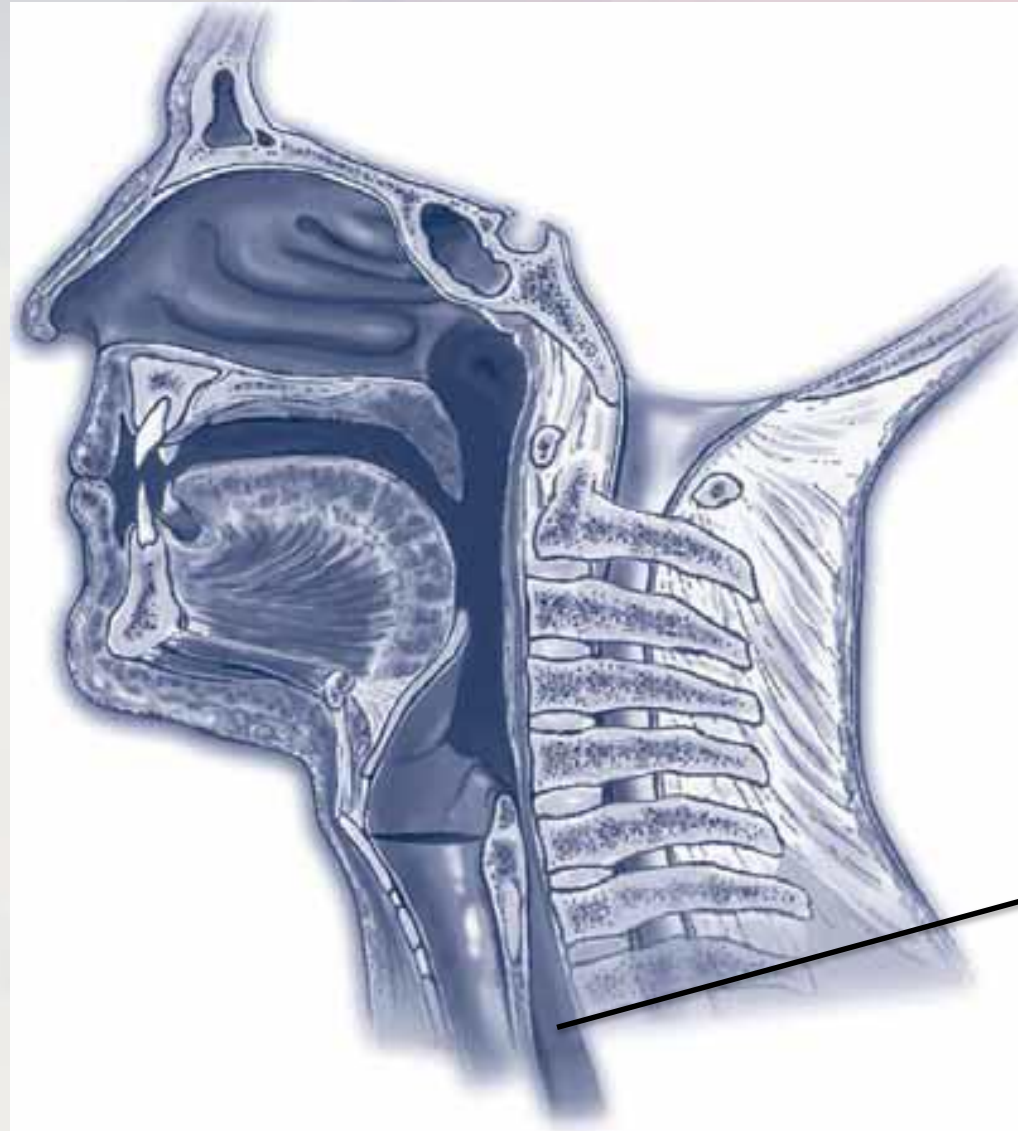


What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

- 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



Bolus



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) 638-8555 or e-mail actioncenter@asha.org.



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For more information

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