

COVID-19 and Swallowing Challenges

People with, and recovering from, COVID-19 can have difficulty swallowing. Every day, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are working to help people regain this most basic and necessary function for health, recovery, and eventual social enjoyment.



What Challenges Look Like: Swallowing problems (called *dysphagia*) may occur from a variety of COVID-19-related causes, which can include damage to vocal cords from being ventilated. Vocal cords protect the airway when eating.

Other COVID-19-related sources of swallowing problems include reduced sensation and/or weakness in the muscles needed for swallowing, fluid buildup in a person's lungs, or the side effects of other COVID-19 complications. One such complication is stroke, which can weaken and/or cause discoordination of muscles in the mouth and throat.

Why Swallowing Is Critical: If someone has serious swallowing problems, food can go into their lungs instead of their stomach. This is called *aspiration*, and it can cause pneumonia and other breathing problems, which may require re-hospitalization.

Proper nutrition and nourishment also foster recovery from illness. If a person is having a hard time chewing and swallowing, they may lose excessive weight or become dehydrated, putting their health in jeopardy.

Meals are also a major source of personal enjoyment, social interactions, and quality of life for many people. People who have trouble eating may isolate themselves from family and friends.

How SLPs Help: In serious cases, SLPs may recommend that individuals not eat by mouth but instead via an alternative source (i.e., tube feeding). In other cases (or after feeding tube removal), SLPs may recommend a special modified diet of foods that are easier to swallow—as well as provide training on techniques that enable safe swallowing, such as how a person sits, chews, or paces their meals. The goal is to have people return to safe swallowing—and to their pre-illness diets.

Where to Find Help: SLPs work in settings that include hospitals, long- and short-term care facilities, private practices, and patients' homes. Many SLPs are also providing their services via telehealth at this time.

Let your doctor know if you or a loved one are experiencing swallowing challenges. These challenges may include coughing or choking on your food, having a wet or gurgly voice when eating, or feeling like food is stuck in your throat. Your doctor should be able to recommend an SLP.

You can also find a searchable database of SLPs at www.asha.org/profind. Check to see if your insurance covers COVID-related swallowing services.