

# Feeding and Swallowing Disorders

## Spotlight on: Adults



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Better Hearing & Speech Month

The ability to eat and drink is critical to maintaining good health—and promoting recovery from illness or injury. Food is also a central part of many social experiences—contributing to an enjoyable and fulfilling life. Some medical conditions in adults can make everyday eating and drinking difficult. These are called *swallowing disorders*, or *dysphagia*.

### More-Than-Occasional Trouble

Everyone has occasional trouble swallowing—chewing a tough piece of meat, gulping hard in order to move a piece of food down your throat, or a taking a sip of water or soda only to have it “go down the wrong pipe.” People who have dysphagia experience trouble like this all of the time.

### Causes

A variety of medical issues can lead to dysphagia:

- **Damage to a person’s brain or nerves**, such as stroke, brain injury, spinal cord injury, Parkinson’s disease, and multiple sclerosis
- **Head or neck problems**, including cancer, head or neck injuries, and mouth or neck surgery
- **Dental issues** such as bad teeth, missing teeth, or dentures that do not fit well
- **Medications that cause dry mouth**, which leads to problems with chewing or swallowing

### Signs of Dysphagia

Signs that could indicate dysphagia include the following:

- Coughing during, or right after, eating or drinking
- Having a wet or gurgly-sounding voice during or after eating or drinking
- Food or liquid leaking from the mouth
- Food getting stuck in the mouth
- Having a hard time breathing after meals
- Losing weight

### Treatment

The type of treatment depends on the cause of the swallowing problem (swallowing is a process involving multiple muscles and organs, so the root of the problem varies). Medical treatment can include medicines, such as in cases of reflux. In severe swallowing situations, people may need to get nutrition in other ways—such as through a feeding tube. Some people may need to eat a modified diet of foods that are easier to chew and swallow. **The goal is to make these short-term solutions—getting people back to eating the foods they enjoy.**

Speech-language pathologists provide swallowing treatment that includes:

- Helping people use their muscles to chew and swallow
- Finding better positions for people to sit or hold their head while eating
- Identifying strategies to make swallowing better and safer
- Advising people on their dietary choices, including softer foods or thicker drinks



**Speech-language pathologists can help!**

Learn more at [www.asha.org/public](http://www.asha.org/public).



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