

Dysphagia

Dysphagia is a difficulty with swallowing, where a person struggles to move food, liquids or saliva from their mouth to their stomach. Dysphagia can have significant psycho-social consequences for older people including impacting on quality of life, and on participation in social activities. Dysphagia can lead to increased risk of mortality and long-term care admission.¹

People living with dysphagia may be at increased risk of weight loss, dehydration, malnutrition, recurrent chest infections and aspiration.² Aspiration can lead to serious complications, including aspiration pneumonia, which is an infection caused by the inhaled material.

Swallowing difficulties are prevalent in 10 to 33% of older adults, and have been reported in almost half of hospital patients who are over 65 years of age.³

Signs and Symptoms of Dysphagia⁴

- Food getting stuck in the throat
- Coughing, throat clearing or choking during/after eating/drinking
- Difficulty chewing food
- Persistent drooling of saliva
- Residue in mouth after swallowing
- Weak and/or wet vocal quality during/after eating/drinking.
- Lengthy mealtimes (30 minutes+)



Supporting Older People With Swallowing Difficulties



The Knowledge and Skills Framework for Healthcare Professionals Working with Older People

aims to improve the quality and safety of care for older people, and describes the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of older people who may experience swallowing difficulties (dysphagia).⁵

All HCPs should be aware of how to identify a person at risk of or living with dysphagia.

Factors Which may Make it Harder to Eat and Drink Safely⁶

- Reduced levels of alertness
- Reduced cognition (including delirium)
- Reduced number of dentition or wearing dentures
- Requiring assistance with eating and drinking

Dysphagia Facts

If a patient coughs this does not necessarily mean they have dysphagia.

Thickener is a prescribed product that does not always improve the safety of the swallow.

Beakers and straws are not suitable for everyone living with a swallowing difficulty. Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) can support the older person's decision making regarding utensils.

How to Support a Person with Swallowing Difficulties

Support the older person to sit upright as far as comfortable both during and immediately after mealtimes

Reduce distractions, encourage small mouthfuls, use of open cups and discourage talking whilst eating

Encourage regular oral hygiene using a soft-bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste

Consult an SLT colleague should you have any concerns regarding an older person's ability to swallow safely and efficiently

Speech and Language Therapy Interventions

SLT can prescribe equipment such as specialised cups (e.g. volume control cups) if required.

Diet and/or fluid modification as per the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI).

Rehabilitation exercises and/or compensatory strategies, should be informed by instrumental swallow assessments, e.g. Videofluoroscopy or Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing².

Resources

Knowledge and Skills Framework for Healthcare Professionals Working with Older People

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/cspd/ncps/older-people/resources/knowledge-skills-framework-for-hcps-working-with-older-people.pdf>

Describes the competencies required to deliver high quality, person centred care to Older People in Ireland. It aims to enable HSCPs to work to their full potential, and can support the identification of training and education opportunities for all HSCPs working in Older Persons services.

(International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative) IDDSI Meal Descriptors/Patient Handouts

<https://shorturl.at/YqdmK>

The IDDSI framework classifies food and drink into standardized levels to ensure safe consumption for individuals with swallowing difficulties. Each of these meal descriptors/patient handouts define the specific texture and consistency requirements of each IDDSI Level.

IDDSI Posters

<https://shorturl.at/xNErX>

A one-page summary of the IDDSI framework, with details on each Level/consistency and how to test for the correct texture. These are available in multiple languages.

HSELand Dysphagia Module

<https://www.hseland.ie/dash/Account/Login>

This course provides an introduction and overview of 'The Safe Management of People with Dysphagia'. This course is a great starting point for HSCPs wanting to learn more about dysphagia and how to support a person with swallowing difficulties.

References

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3. Doan, T.N et al (2022) Prevalence and methods for assessment of oropharyngeal dysphagia in older adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 11(9), p.2605.
4. Logemann, J. (1983). Evaluation and treatment of swallowing disorders. Pro-Ed: Texas.
5. Knowledge and Skills Framework for Healthcare Professionals Working with Older People. (National Clinical Programme for Older People, CDI/0081/1.0, 2024).
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