



Dementia Australia

Eating, Drinking and Swallowing Difficulties in Dementia

Difficulty with swallowing (dysphagia) means that it takes more time and effort to move food or drink from your mouth to your stomach. Occasional swallowing difficulties are generally not a reason to be concerned. They may simply occur when you eat too fast or don't chew your food well enough. However, persistent difficulties with swallowing may indicate a medical condition that requires assessment and treatment. Dysphagia can occur at any age, but it is more common in older adults. People with dementia can experience swallowing difficulty as changes in the brain cause changes in the muscles, nerves and reflexes in the mouth and throat. These changes can gradually affect the ability to eat independently and swallow safely.

Signs and symptoms of dysphagia

- Coughing or choking when eating or drinking.
- Throat clearing after eating or drinking.
- Sensation of food getting “stuck” in the throat or neck region.
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing.
- Holding food or drink in the mouth without swallowing.
- Drooling or inability to control saliva or food/drink in mouth.
- Gurgly or wet voice during or after swallowing.

- Unexplained weight loss.
- Recurring chest infections.

Complications of dysphagia

If left untreated, swallowing difficulties can cause serious health complications. Food or drink may pass into the lungs (called aspiration) causing a chest infection or pneumonia. Swallowing problems can also cause weight loss, dehydration and malnutrition.

Treatment and assistance

Treatment and management for swallowing difficulties is available. If signs and symptoms of swallowing difficulties are present, a speech pathologist can assist. The speech pathologist can give advice on what foods/drinks to eat and things to avoid. They can also suggest strategies to reduce the chance of food and drinks entering the lungs. The speech pathologist can also provide information and recommendation on how to make mealtimes easier and more enjoyable for people with dementia.