



What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing foods and liquids, is a commonly occurring symptom of many diseases. Dysphagia can affect men and women of all ages.

What Can Cause Dysphagia?

The most common causes of dysphagia include:

- Head and Neck Cancer
- Stroke
- Head or Neck Injury
- Cerebral Palsy
- Parkinson's Disease (PD)
- Birth Abnormalities
- Esophageal Infection or Irritation
- Dementia

How Common Is Dysphagia?

According to the National Foundation on Swallowing & Swallowing Disorders, Dysphagia affects 1 in 20 Americans. It is estimated that 10 million Americans are evaluated for swallowing difficulties each year. Adults make up 85% of individuals diagnosed with dysphagia.

How is Dysphagia Diagnosed?

Instrumental Evaluation of Swallowing

Much like a broken leg, dysphagia cannot be accurately evaluated without imaging. There are two primary types of dysphagia imaging used to examine dysphagia.

Flexible Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES) involves placement of a tiny camera through the nasal passage where it rests behind the soft palate. While the patient swallows food and liquid the endoscopist (usually an SLP) assesses the pharyngeal (throat) structures and function of the swallow.

A Modified Barium Swallow Study (MBSS) involves taking a video x-ray of a person's ingestion of food and liquid containing barium, a mineral that makes it visible on x-ray. The SLP and radiologist then assess the oral and pharyngeal structures and swallowing function.

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Oral Hygiene



Toothbrushing's Role in the Prevention of Pneumonia in People with Dysphagia



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Theresa Richard, M.A., CCC-SLP, BCS-S
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Did You Know?

Poor Oral Health Can Increase the Risk of Aspiration Pneumonia

Individuals with dysphagia are at an increased risk of having food or liquid enter the airway. Food or liquid going past the vocal cords and into the trachea is known as **aspiration**.

Aspiration of food and liquid alone does not cause pneumonia. It is the bacteria in the mouth that enters the lungs with the food which causes pneumonia (Ashford, 2012).

How Do I Decrease Oral Bacteria?

The best way to decrease the amount of bacteria in the mouth is by brushing the teeth, palate, and tongue with a toothbrush and toothpaste (Sheffler, 2018).

What if I Wear Dentures?

Even if you have no teeth or wear dentures, proper oral hygiene is important to reduce the risk of pneumonia associated with dysphagia. Follow your dentist's guidelines on cleaning your dentures and continue to use a toothbrush to clean your gums, palate, and tongue daily.

Do Pink Sponges Work for Cleaning the Mouth?

No. Bacteria in the mouth coats the teeth, palate, and tongue. This coating is called a "biofilm" and contains a dense layer of bacteria that can make you sick if it enters your lungs.

Pink toothette sponges do not scrub the teeth like a toothbrush, so are not effective at removing the biofilm.(Sheffler, 2018).

In fact, toothbrushing reduces the risk of developing pneumonia in patients on mechanical ventilation by 50% as compared to using pink swabs (Ross & Crumpler, 2005)!

"Aspiration of food and liquid alone does not cause pneumonia. Pneumonia is caused by the bacteria in the mouth that enters the lungs with the food." (Ashford, 2012)

What about Lemon Glycerin Swabs?

Lemon swabs are also not effective at removing biofilm. Additionally, they have been linked to increased dental erosion, dry mouth, and increased saliva acidity (Sheffler, 2014).



Steps of Thorough Toothbrushing

The American Dental Association (ADA) has provided guidance on how to ensure the mouth is properly cleaned during toothbrushing. Most people should brush their teeth 2 times a day.

1. Place your toothbrush at a 45-degree angle to the gums.
2. Gently move the brush back and forth in short (tooth-wide) strokes.
3. Brush the outer surfaces, the inner surfaces, and the chewing surfaces of the teeth.
4. To clean the inside surfaces of the front teeth, tilt the brush vertically and make several up-and-down strokes.
5. Turn the toothbrush with bristles facing up and gently clean the palate of the mouth in small circles.
6. Protrude the tongue and use short strokes to clean the surface of the tongue.
7. Rinse well with water and spit the water into the sink, cup, or a basin to be disposed of.

Suction toothbrushes are an excellent option for individuals who are medically fragile or unsafe to swallow any foods or liquids.

(For more info, visit www.ADA.org)