

Tips for Careworkers: Dysphagia



What it is: Dysphagia is difficulty swallowing. The person finds it difficult to swallow food or liquid, including medications in liquid or tablet form.

Why it matters: Dysphagia is common in older people and people in palliative care. Careworkers have an important role in supporting oral care and positioning of the person. Dysphagia can lead to:

- poor nutrition
- dehydration
- aspiration (breathing a foreign object or liquid into an airway)
- asphyxiation (lack of oxygen)
- pneumonia.

What I need to know: Any changes to the normal function of the mouth, pharynx or larynx or oesophagus can cause dysphagia.

Dysphagia may be due to:

- changes associated with ageing
- the side effect of medication
- treatment including radiation and chemotherapy for cancer.

Dysphagia is common in advanced or terminal illness. Dysphagia is also associated with neurological conditions particularly:

- dementia
- Parkinson's Disease (PD)
- Motor Neurone Disease (MND)
- stroke.

Note

People providing meal time assistance should have received training in assisting people with swallowing problems and managing choking episodes.

Do

Look out for and report to nursing/ supervisory staff if a person:

- chokes when eating, drinking or taking medication
- has the feeling of food sticking in the throat
- dribbles or has food escaping from the mouth
- coughs during or after eating, drinking or taking medication
- eats or drinks very slowly
- refuses food and fluids
- doesn't swallow food, fluids or medication but keeps it in the mouth.

Do

When someone is dying, their family can be upset that they are not eating or drinking. You can:

- reassure the family
- let them offer the person sips of water or if appropriate moisten the mouth with a wet swab.

Name:

My reflections:

Dysphagia is difficulty with what?

What are some of the signs I should look out for and report to nursing/supervisory staff?

My notes:

See related palliAGED Practice
Tip Sheets:
Advance Dementia
Nutrition and Hydration
Oral Care

References used to develop this sheet are available at
www.palliaged.com.au