

## What is dysphagia? WHAT IS DYSPHAGIA?

Dysphagia is a disorder of swallowing and/or feeding. Dysphagia may occur during any of the processes involved in the act of swallowing, including

- preparing for a bite or sip of liquid,
- chewing,
- moving the food in the mouth,
- triggering the swallow, and
- moving the food from the mouth to the stomach.

## Signs & Symptoms WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DYSPHAGIA?

A normal swallow is quiet, painless, and takes only one to two seconds. Disordered swallowing may involve one or more of the following:

- aspiration (escape of food or liquid into the lungs) or labored breathing;
- recurrent pneumonia or respiratory infections;
- difficulty coordinating breathing with eating or drinking;
- unexplained weight loss, altered diet, or loss of appetite;
- frequent coughing or frequent low-grade fever,
- wet vocal quality (“gurgly” voice);
- history of gastrointestinal problems (hiatal hernia, ulcer);
- abnormal oral feeding or difficulty chewing;
- irritability during feedings or failure to thrive;
- prolonged feeding times or refusal to eat; and
- dehydration.

## Causes WHAT ARE SOME CAUSES OF DYSPHAGIA?

There are many causes of dysphagia. A few of the common ones are

- cerebral vascular accident (a stroke),
- neurological disorders,
- gastrointestinal problems,
- airway obstructions and conditions,
- heart disease,
- cleft lip and/or palate, and
- premature birth.

## Evaluation HOW ARE FEEDING AND SWALLOWING PROBLEMS EVALUATED?

A careful review of signs and symptoms is required to assess dysphagia. Often a swallowing team works together to address various aspects of the problem. This may include consideration of

- medical records and the history of the problem,
- oral motor status,
- clinical evaluation of client feeding/swallowing, or
- medical tests such as a Modified Barium Swallow (MBS) or Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES).

## Treatment WHAT TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE?

Treatment for dysphagia focuses first on evaluating the problem and determining safe feeding options for the individual. Next, the Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) works with the patient to improve food management and swallowing skills in order to advance the individual’s diet. Each treatment program is specifically designed by the SLP to address the particular needs of the individual.

Treatment may involve

- altering the manner in which the person swallows;
- improving muscle strength, tone, mobility, and coordination through exercises designed to target the muscles involved in swallowing;
- biofeedback;
- recommendations for food/liquid consistencies, and special equipment or techniques for feeding and swallowing; or
- changing the type of food presented.

# Find an SLP

## HOW DO I FIND A QUALIFIED SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST?

SLPs who evaluate and supervise treatment of dysphagia must hold a state license, a master's or doctoral degree, and the Certificate of Clinical Competence from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. SLPs work in a variety of settings:

- private clinics,
- rehabilitation centers,
- schools and universities, and
- hospitals and specialty clinics.

You may contact TSHA (888/729-8742 or <[www.txsha.org](http://www.txsha.org)> or ASHA <[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)> for resources and more information. To find a nearby SLP who has experience in dysphagia, contact your local hospital, school, or physician.

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This information is presented by the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association (TSHA). It is designed to inform the general public about the professions of audiology and speech-language pathology and the help available from these professionals. For further information contact:

Texas Speech-Language Hearing Association  
918 Congress Ave., Ste. 200 • Austin, TX 78701  
512/494-1127 • 888/SAY-TSHA (729-8742)  
512/494-1129 Fax  
[www.txsha.org](http://www.txsha.org)



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