

SWALLOWING DIFFICULTY

Dysphagia is a medical term that is used to refer to difficulties with swallowing. Dysphagia usually arises as a complication of another health condition, such as a stroke, throat and mouth cancer.

Types of dysphagia

There are two types of dysphagia:

- **High dysphagia.** This is where the difficulties in swallowing are due to problems with the mouth or throat.
- **Low dysphagia.** This is where the difficulties in swallowing are due to problems with the oesophagus. (oesophagus is tube that runs from throat to stomach)

Low dysphagia is often caused by a blockage in or irritation to the oesophagus, and can often be treated using surgery. High dysphagia is often caused by underlying problems with the nerves and muscles that help control the swallowing process. High dysphagia can be more difficult to treat than low dysphagia.

How common is dysphagia?

Dysphagia can be a common condition among people with certain related health conditions. It is estimated that 30-40% of elderly people staying in nursing homes have some degree of dysphagia. Dysphagia is also a common complication of strokes, occurring in an estimated one in every two cases.

Symptoms of dysphagia

The symptoms of dysphagia include:

- not being able to swallow,
- pain while swallowing,
- bringing food back up,
- coughing or choking when eating,
- coughing or gagging when swallowing,
- a sensation that food is stuck in your throat or chest,
- unexplained weight loss, and
- developing repeated and frequent lung infections (pneumonia).

Causes

Neurological causes

Some neurological causes of dysphagia include:

- stroke,
- cerebral palsy,
- Parkinson's disease,
- multiple sclerosis, and
- motor neurone disease.

Obstruction

Health conditions that cause an obstruction in or a narrowing of the throat and oesophagus can make swallowing difficult. Some causes of obstruction and narrowing include:

- mouth or lung cancer,
- cleft lip and palate,
- radiotherapy for cancer
- gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD) (stomach acid can damage oesophagus)
- infections, such as tuberculosis or herpes simplex.

Muscular conditions

Any health condition that affects the muscles that are used to push food down through the oesophagus and into the stomach can cause dysphagia.

Two examples include **Scleroderma**, an immune disorder and **Achalasia**, a disorder that causes the oesophagus to stiffen up. The muscles used for swallowing become weaker with age, this explains why dysphagia is a relatively widespread condition among elderly people.

Treating dysphagia

Treating High dysphagia

It can be difficult to achieve a complete cure for high dysphagia because the underlying neurological problems cannot usually be corrected using medication or surgery.

The exception to this is dysphagia caused by Parkinson's disease. While Parkinson's disease

cannot be cured, the symptoms of dysphagia can be controlled using medication.

Excluding dysphagia that is caused by Parkinson's disease, there are three main treatment options for high dysphagia:

- **Swallowing therapy**, where a speech and language therapist (SLT) will teach the patient to 'relearn' how to swallow, or find a new way of swallowing.
- **Dietary changes**, such as eating softer foods.
- **Feeding tubes**,

Treating esophageal or 'low' dysphagia

Surgery

This can include dilation which is a widely used technique in cases of obstruction. It involves placing a small balloon inside the oesophagus. The balloon is inflated, which gradually widens the oesophagus, and then the balloon is deflated and removed.

Botulinum toxin

Minute amounts of botulinum toxin can be used to treat achalasia (achalasia is explained above)

Disclaimer: Information given is suitable for the person above only; Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

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