

DYSPHAGIA AND ASPIRATION

A common problem for many of the people that you work with is dysphagia. **Dysphagia** describes any problem a person may have with swallowing. Swallowing problems can lead to aspiration.

Aspiration means food or fluids that should go into the stomach go into the lungs instead. Usually when this happens the person will cough to clear the food or fluid out of their lungs. Sometimes, however, the person does not cough at all. This is what is known as a "silent aspiration." Frequent aspiration can cause damage to the lungs if it is not treated. There are several ways to tell if someone has dysphagia or aspiration problems. The person's Health Care Provider will order the tests that they think will be best for each person.

Common signs of dysphagia and/or aspiration are:

- Coughing before or after swallowing
- Much drooling, especially during meals
- Pocketing food inside the cheek
- Choking on certain foods, for example white bread
- Nose running or sneezing during dining
- Trouble chewing
- Trouble swallowing certain types of fluids or foods
- Taking a very long time to finish a meal
- Getting tired during the meal
- Refusals to eat certain foods or finish a meal
- A complaint of feeling like something is caught in the throat
- A gurgly voice during or after eating or drinking
- Throat clearing after a meal
- Repeated episodes of choking, frequent colds, pneumonias or "allergies"
- Unexplained weight loss
- Unexplained fevers that come and go
- Coughing when lying flat or sitting up quickly from a reclined position

Conditions that may lead to dysphagia and/or aspiration:

- Aging
- Poor dental alignment or missing teeth
- Seizures
- Decreased level of awareness
- Fatigue
- Some medication side effects weaken ability to swallow
- Poor muscle function
- Poor eating habits described as stuffing, or rapid eating
- Some medical conditions
- Poor positioning or posture while eating

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Call 911 if the person is:

- Blue, can't talk or make a sound or is not breathing

Attempt Heimlich Maneuver

- Having difficulty breathing
- Looks very ill

If you think there might be a problem with swallowing:

- Document what you see.
- Tell other staff what you see.
- Tell the nurse or your supervisor or health care consultant what you see.
- Offer foods that the person seems to tolerate better.
- Stop the meal if the symptoms worsen and report it to the nurse or your supervisor according to your agency's policy.
- Have the person eat at a slow pace.
- Tell the Health Care Provider (HCP) what you see.

If a person has tests that show they have trouble swallowing, the HCP will tell you what you need to do. You must do exactly what the HCP tells you to do, or you may cause harm to the person.

