



THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG  
SWALLOWING RESEARCH LABORATORY

## What is swallowing disorders? Diagnosis and Treatment



### How do we swallow?

Normal swallow includes 4 stages

**1.** Food or drinks are placed in the mouth, mixed with saliva and formed into a cohesive ball (bolus).

**2.** The bolus is then moved to the back of the mouth by a front-to-back squeezing action by the tongue.

**3.** The throat muscles squeeze the bolus downwards and triggers a swallow response. When this response is set off, our breathing temporarily stops; the airway closes to ensure that foods and drinks go down the oesophagus instead of the trachea.

**4.** The bolus is then transferred to the stomach through the oesophagus.

The normal swallow process takes approximately 10 seconds.

### Common causes

- Stroke
- Parkinson's disease
- Dementia
- Head & Neck Cancer
- Head injury

### Common symptoms

#### Before and after eating or drinking

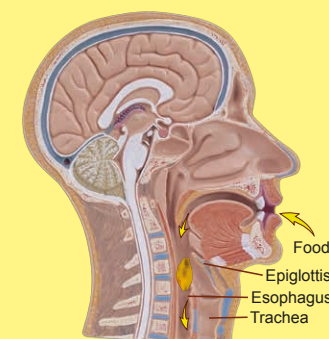
- Coughing, choking or throat clearing \*\*
- Problems with clearing food from the mouth or throat
- Extra effort or time needed to swallow or chew

#### General health

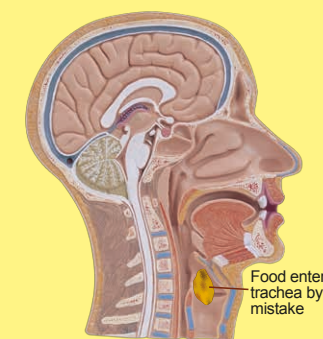
- Recurring chest infections or pneumonia
- Continuous weight loss
- Weak cough

\*\*If it is silent aspiration, the individual may not cough or clear the throat.

### Swallowing process



Normal Swallow



Abnormal Swallow

### Common complications

- Weight loss
- Malnutrition
- Poor quality of life because of the reduced mealtimes enjoyment
- Foods / drinks entering the respiratory tract (Choking)
- Dehydration
- Suffocation

### How to manage?

There are ways that families and carers can help people with swallowing problems. You can see a speech therapist for a swallowing assessment. The speech therapist will determine an individualised plan based on the underlying cause and severity of your dysphagia.

### Where can find help?

You may find a speech therapist from the following organizations:

- Public hospitals managed by the Hospital Authority (medical doctors' referrals needed)
- Private hospitals / Private speech therapy clinics
- Speech therapy clinics at The University of Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The Education University of Hong Kong

#### Information provided by:

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