What is swallowing disorders? Diagnosis and Treatment

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.

How do we swallow?

Normal swallow includes 4 steps

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 complications
• Weight loss
• Malnutrition
• Suffocation
• Poor quality of life because of the reduced mealtime enjoyment
• Foods / drinks entering the respiratory tract (Choking)

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:
Swallowing Research Laboratory
Division of Speech & Hearing Sciences
Faculty of Education
The University of Hong Kong
http://www.speech.hku.hk/clinic/swallowing

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Common symptoms

Dehydration
Suffocation

Food
Epiglottis
Esophagus
Trachea

Swallowing process

Normal Swallow
Abnormal Swallow

The swallowing process.

How to manage?