

Swallowing and Safe Feeding Techniques

Safe swallowing involves the timely and coordinated transport of food, fluids and saliva from the mouth through the throat to the stomach. When a swallowing problem (dysphagia) is present, there may be a high risk of food, fluids and saliva entering the lungs (aspiration). The person may not be aware that this is happening (silent aspiration). Aspiration can be dangerous as it can cause pneumonia. The person may also be at higher risk of choking.

The following techniques should be implemented to improve safety when eating and drinking:

Safe feeding techniques can significantly improve the person's safety when eating/drinking:

- Only offer food and drink when the patient is **awake and alert**
- Ensure the person is comfortable and **positioned as upright as possible** and well supported in bed/chair for oral intake. The head should be level with chin straight.
- Allow the person to self-feed wherever possible
- Use hand over hand feeding to assist them to feed themselves if needed
- **Make the environment quiet and free from distractions**
- Inform the person what is happening if they need feeding
- Ensure the person being fed can see the food approaching
- Sit down at the same level as the person you are feeding
- Maintain eye contact
- **Be patient, do not rush**
- Do not ask questions, be comfortable with silence
- Prompt the person to chew/swallow – verbally or with gentle touch
- Make sure they have swallowed one mouthful before giving the next. Allow time for a second swallow if needed
- Give **small mouthfuls** using a teaspoon (not large dessertspoon)
- Plate warmers can be helpful for slow eaters
- Different/contrasting tastes and temperatures can help with mouth holding and slow eating
- Offer sips of drink between mouthfuls of food
- Use a normal cup, or if needed a lidded beaker (avoid straws)
- **Check mouth is clear** of residue at the end of the meal – particularly inside the jaw line and roof of the mouth
- **Provide at least twice daily mouthcare (teeth, dentures, gums and mouth/tongue cleaning) – good oral hygiene is crucial in dysphagia**