



## A fact sheet for aged care residents, their families and carers

# Supporting safe and enjoyable mealtimes for people with swallowing difficulties

This fact sheet discusses swallowing problems, known as dysphagia. It outlines the types of support you may need if you have any swallowing difficulties.



### Signs that you may be having difficulty swallowing

Swallowing difficulties can impact on your physical and mental health.

Signs of swallowing difficulties can include:

- choking episodes where food can block your airway
- coughing or throat clearing
- wet sounding or gurgly breathing and voice
- increased breathing problems
- food getting stuck in your throat
- food or drink dribbling or escaping from your mouth
- fatigue during meals; only able to eat a few mouthfuls at a time
- taking a long time to eat a full meal
- food remaining in your mouth or cheeks during or after eating
- avoiding certain foods because they are hard to chew or swallow
- recent repeated chest infections or unexplained weight loss
- avoiding social situations due to embarrassment of swallowing difficulties or fear of choking
- poorly fitting dentures which can cause choking or lead to poor chewing.



## Your care team will recognise and act on signs of swallowing problems

Your care team will have a plan for any emergency responses. Staff will be trained to identify and respond to choking and detect infection.

Your care team will refer you to allied health professionals as needed, to assess your individual situation. This will involve reviewing the causes and risks relating to your swallowing difficulties and advise on ways to best support you, your nutrition, health, comfort and wishes.

With your agreement, your care team will begin by referring you to a speech pathologist who can assess and diagnose your swallowing difficulties.

They may also refer you to a dietitian to ensure your nutritional needs are still being met.

You may also see a dental expert to assess any oral health and hygiene needs, or an occupational therapist to advise on special utensils that may help you.

You may see your GP or a pharmacist if medications are making swallowing more difficult, or if medicines need to be changed so that you can swallow them more easily and safely.



**Speech pathologists** are qualified health professionals who assess and diagnose swallowing difficulties. They prescribe tailored management strategies that may include safe swallowing strategies and/or texture modified food/drinks.

Speech pathologists work with people with dysphagia to help them understand their situation and swallow food and drink more easily and safely, improving their mealtime experience. They can also provide specific mealtime support strategies and training to carers and staff.



### **Risks of swallowing difficulties include:**

- aspiration pneumonia – food and/or drink ‘going down the wrong way’ and entering the airway or lungs instead of the stomach, causing irritation or chest infection, malnutrition and dehydration
- poor mealtime experience limiting opportunity for enjoyable social interactions
- reduced quality of life, including effects on mental health
- choking, in some cases causing death.



## **Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs)**

are recognised professionals with the qualifications and skills to provide expert nutrition and dietary advice.

When an individual is identified with dysphagia (as assessed by a speech pathologist), a dietitian will work as part of the team to meet the dietary needs of the person.

An individual's agreement to texture modification of their food and drink should follow a discussion with the dietitian about their swallowing risks, health status, usual eating patterns, goals, food preferences and cultural choices. Dietitians can then help to ensure that individuals with swallowing difficulties have their nutrition requirements met in a safe and pleasurable manner to support a good quality of life.

## **Support strategies**

Your care team, including your speech pathologist, dietitian and other health professionals, may recommend the following support strategies:

- ✓ individualised swallowing therapy exercises prescribed by the speech pathologist
- ✓ mealtime assistance strategies, for example a support person to ensure you take double swallows for each mouthful, are sitting upright and are given extra time to swallow and eat
- ✓ texture modification to food/drink to make it easier and safer to swallow, and reduce discomfort
- ✓ smaller more frequent meals
- ✓ nutritional strategies and support
- ✓ level of supervision and prompting required when eating or drinking
- ✓ support to have enjoyable mealtime social interactions.

**If your family brings you food and drink,** you can ask the speech pathologist and dietitian to meet with your family so they know the best type of food and drink to bring you and understand what supports you need.





## Individual mealtime support plan

Support strategies are important as part of your mealtime support plan.

Your mealtime support plan will be developed in consultation with you and reviewed and changed as your needs and wishes change.

You should be provided with each recommendation, and the reasons for each recommendation, to help you make an informed choice about what is included in your plan.

All staff should be aware of and understand how to implement your mealtime support plan.

Your care team will document all referrals made, assessment details and the mealtime support plan, including recommendations and management strategies in your plan. They will be aware of your preferences, wishes and decisions.

Texture modified food and drinks is a commonly used strategy but is often only one part of an overall mealtime support plan.

You may choose not to follow all recommendations, such as prescribed texture modifications to food and drink. You may also choose to follow your plan some of the time or most of the time. Your provider should follow a planned approach to supporting your informed choice to eat and drink with acknowledged risk. If there is a significant risk of choking, please take into account that this can also be very distressing for others to see.

Refer to the fact sheet, Informed choice and supported decision making for people who eat and/or drink when there may be a risk at [www.agedcarequality.gov.au/consumers/food-dining-and-nutrition](http://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/consumers/food-dining-and-nutrition).

## Review the mealtime support plan

Swallowing difficulties and the conditions that cause them can change over time. This can include a deterioration or improvement. You can let your care team know if you have experienced any changes.

Your mealtime support plan will include a review time, as recommended by the speech pathologist.

## What to do if your choice is being limited

If you have concerns that your choice or wishes are being limited by your aged care provider, you can:

1. talk to your aged care provider in the first instance
2. speak with an aged care advocate at the Older Persons Advocacy Network (OPAN) on **1800 700 600** or visit [opan.com.au](http://opan.com.au), for support to raise your concerns, and/or
3. contact the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission on **1800 951 822** or visit our website, [agedcarequality.gov.au](http://agedcarequality.gov.au). We can help you resolve a complaint about your aged care provider.

## More information

### Swallowing

Additional fact sheets on swallowing are available at [www.agedcarequality.gov.au/consumers/food-dining-and-nutrition](http://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/consumers/food-dining-and-nutrition):

- Nutrition and texture modified food and drinks: eating and drinking when you have problems with swallowing
- Informed choice and supported decision making for people who eat and/or drink when there may be a risk.



**Phone**

1800 951 822



**Web**

[agedcarequality.gov.au](http://agedcarequality.gov.au)



**Write**

Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission  
GPO Box 9819, in your capital city