

Swallowing and Feeding Difficulties

Swallowing difficulty (also known as dysphagia) is the inability to swallow solids or liquids effectively or safely. Feeding difficulties in infants and children can refer to difficulties taking from the bottle or breast, difficulties weaning and transitioning through textures, difficulties with chewing or picky eating. In adults, feeding difficulties refer to problems bringing food and drinks to the mouth.

Dysphagia can arise from a variety of conditions that affect the brain, nervous system, or muscles of the swallowing mechanism. Swallowing and feeding difficulties in infants and children can also arise from similar causes. In adults, feeding difficulties are often caused by neurological injury (e.g. post-stroke or traumatic brain injury), changes to body structures involved in swallowing (e.g. neck tumour) or cognitive deficits (e.g. dementia).

Dysphagia and feeding difficulties can lead to inadequate hydration and nutrition, compromising immune systems and increasing likelihood of illnesses. In some cases, chest infections can arise due to the inability to protect the airway during eating.

With the proper intervention, individuals with swallowing or feeding difficulties are generally able to ensure adequate hydration and nutrition through a variety of means.

How is it treated?

Helping individuals with swallowing or feeding difficulties begins with holistic clinical and instrumental assessments. Speech therapists are the primary healthcare professional addressing swallowing and feeding difficulties, but multiple clinical and allied health disciplines may be involved, including neurology, respiratory, otolaryngology (ENT), radiology, occupational therapy and dietetics.

What does rehabilitation involve?

The overall aim of rehabilitation for swallowing and feeding difficulties is to ensure adequate and safe hydration and nutrition.

Treatments may utilise compensatory approaches (e.g. diet and postural modifications) or rehabilitative approaches involving exercises. At times, artificial nutrition (e.g. tube feeding) may be recommended as short term or complementary interventions. For patients who have difficulties coming into the hospital for their therapy sessions, telehealth programmes may also be recommended by your therapist to perform therapy sessions using virtual technology at home. We also offer McNeill Dysphagia Therapy Programme (MDTP) in our outpatient settings for adults who are suitable for this programme for their swallow rehabilitation.

The individual's full feeding history will be examined at the first clinic visit, followed by clinical evaluations of the swallowing mechanism and swallowing/feeding function. Videofluoroscopic and/or endoscopic swallowing evaluations may be advised for further assessment at the clinician's discretion. Comprehensive treatment plans will be drawn out after the completion of investigations. These plans will be discussed during consultation with the patient and/or their caregiver, taking into consideration their specific circumstances and preferences.

Useful websites

[Swallowing Disorders in Adults](#)

[Feeding and Swallowing Disorders in Children](#)

[Videofluoroscopic Swallowing Evaluation](#)