

Swallowing difficulties in people with Dementia

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia means difficulty swallowing. It is common in people with dementia and can make eating and drinking unsafe.

This leaflet explains:

- Signs to look out for
- When to seek help from a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT)
- Tips to try before referring to a SLT

Common eating and swallowing problems in dementia

People with dementia may experience:

- Difficulty recognising food
- Refusing to eat or drink
- Holding food in the mouth or forgetting to swallow
- Spitting out food
- Getting distracted while eating
- Cramming food in their mouth
- Difficulty using utensils
- Delayed swallow
- Coughing or choking while eating

These problems can lead to:

- Dehydration (not drinking enough)
- Malnutrition (weight loss)
- Lung infections (aspiration pneumonia – food or drink entering the lungs)

continued over...

Problem	Possible causes	What you can do
Droping of food or saliva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not swallowing frequently enough • Poor posture • Weak muscles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage upright sitting • Remind them to swallow • Try different food textures • Speak to GP if saliva problems continue
Holding food in mouth or spitting it out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced awareness or taste • Drowsiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use verbal prompts • Try stronger flavours (sweet, sour) • Talk about the food • Use cold drinks to increase sensation • Try textured foods if swallowing is safe
Difficulty swallowing safely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coughing • Choking • Wet voice after eating • Recurrent chest infections 	Refer to SLT for assessment

Improving mealtime safety

- **Supervision:** Offer help and monitor signs of swallowing problems
- **Good positioning:** Sit upright while eating
- **Encourage independence:** Let them feed themselves as much as possible
- **If helping to feed:** Watch for swallowing before giving more food

Behaviour	How to help
Agitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce noise and distractions • Consider personal preferences (alone or with others?)
Drowsiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check for medical issues or infections • Feed when most alert • Avoid feeding if too drowsy (risk of choking)

Behaviour	How to help
Wandering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer finger foods • Give reminders that it is mealtime • Reduce distractions • Use clear cups/plates • Help with hand-over-hand feeding
Easily distracted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce distractions • Use clear cups/plates • Help with hand-over-hand feeding
Refusing food/drink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check for pain, changes in taste, or need for help • Offer small amounts frequently • Use verbal cues, "This smells nice!"
Eating too fast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut food into small pieces • Give verbal prompts to slow down • Refer to SLT if coughing/choking
Eating too slowly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep food warm • Offer small meals more often • Refer to SLT if coughing/choking
Eating non-food items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase supervision • Remove unsafe objects

When to refer to Speech and Language Therapy

Contact SLT if the person:

- Has frequent chest infections
- Coughs or chokes while eating or drinking
- Loses weight unexpectedly
- Continues to struggle despite trying the strategies above

continued over...

Information needed for referral:

- Which foods/drinks cause problems?
- How often do symptoms occur?
- History of chest infections
- Weight changes
- Current diet and eating environment

Speech and Language Therapy contact details:

Phone: 0151 604 7271

Email: wchc.salt@nhs.net

If you would like this information in another format or language, please contact the Your Experience Team on freephone 0800 694 5530. Alternatively you can email wcnt.yourexperience@nhs.net

June 2025 V1



wchc.nhs.uk



[@nhsbuzz](https://www.facebook.com/nhsbuzz)



[@wchc_nhs](https://twitter.com/wchc_nhs)