

Oral health advice for patients with dysphagia (swallowing difficulties)

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia is a difficulty in swallowing. (This causes problems when food and liquids are being moved from the mouth down into the throat and oesophagus.)

Causes can be psychological, neurological or due to a physical impairment.

For example, people who have had a stroke, head and neck cancer, those with Multiple Sclerosis, dementia or learning disabilities. Some people that have severe issues swallowing and may be fitted with a PEG or RIG (a feeding tube directly into the stomach).

Dysphagia can cause:

- Build-up of plaque on the teeth and food debris in the cheeks or under the tongue
- Swallowing problems can result in aspiration of foods, drinks, a person's own saliva or water from the dentist's drill.
- This means the substance goes into the lungs rather than the stomach, or "goes down the wrong way" which can then lead to recurrent chest infections or more serious problems such as aspiration pneumonia.

It is very important to reduce the amount of potentially harmful bacteria in the mouth by regular and effective mouth care.

Advice for patients:

- We recommend brushing your teeth at least twice a day using a fluoride toothpaste, that is non-foaming (such as Oranurse or other toothpastes that do not contain sodium lauryl sulphate, like Sensodyne).
- If you no longer have any teeth, we still recommend brushing your mouth with a moist toothbrush to remove any debris.

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- Sometimes your dentist may recommend the use of a high fluoride toothpaste instead.
- Chlorhexidine gel can be applied to the gums reduce the amount of bacteria in the mouth, which can be prescribed or purchased over the counter.
- Spit any excess if possible after toothbrushing and DO NOT rinse or use mouthwash.
- A small, soft manual or electric toothbrush is recommended.
- If you wear dentures, they must be brushed daily and soaked in an appropriate cleaning solution regularly. Please remove them when sleeping and keep them in water in a container.

Advice for carers:

- If you are supporting someone with swallowing difficulties to brush you may find it easier to stand or sit behind them.
- Ensure that they are upright, their head is supported and encourage them to adopt a chin-tuck position.
- It may also be helpful to use a three-sided toothbrush (Collis curve) or a suction (aspirating) toothbrush.
- You may need give them frequent breaks.
- If you do not have suction at home, use a clean towel or cloth to remove any fluids or excess from the mouth.
- To prevent cracking or drying of the lips, use a water-based moisturiser.

We understand that patients with swallowing difficulties can feel anxious about choking during dental treatment. We can discuss ways of providing dental care with you and managing your aspiration risk.

Opening hours:

Monday - Thursday 8.30am - 5.00pm

Friday 8.30am - 4.30pm

St Catherine's Health Centre Dental Clinic
0151 514 6420

Victoria Central Health Centre Dental Clinic
0151 514 6266

Out of Hours:

Out of Hours Service 111

Revive Dental Care
0161 476 9651

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

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