



Swallowing Problems (Dysphagia) and ALS

Dysphagia is a term that refers to swallowing problems that can occur in the mouth, throat, or esophagus (a tube leading from your throat to your stomach). This can affect sensation, strength, and/or coordination of the muscles involved in swallowing. It is estimated that 10 million Americans are evaluated for swallowing difficulties each year.

Most people with ALS experience swallowing problems at some point in their disease. Swallowing problems typically start in the mouth and tongue and progress to weakness in the throat muscles and difficulty initiating a swallow.

Symptoms of dysphagia may include:

- Difficulty chewing hard solid foods
- Weakness in your tongue that makes it difficult to eat/drink
- Difficulty moving foods/liquids into your throat with your tongue
- Coughing or throat clearing frequently during or after meals
- Difficulty taking pills
- Slow progressive weight loss with good appetite
- A wet or gurgly voice while eating or drinking
- Getting strangled easily when eating or drinking
- Running a low-grade temperature (mild fever) accompanying any of the above symptoms (see your doctor if you have a fever).

What tests are used to detect dysphagia?

Swallowing is assessed by a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP). There are 3 different tests he/she can perform. After any of the tests have been performed you should receive recommendations on the safest foods/liquids to eat/drink and swallow strategies.

- Clinical Swallow evaluation is when an SLP assesses your swallow function by observing your movements and watching you eat and drink different foods/liquids.
- Videofluoroscopic Swallow Study (VFSS, aka MBS) is an x-ray study where you eat and drink different foods and liquids coated with barium, while the SLP and radiology doctor watch you swallow.
- Flexible Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES) is when the SLP or trained doctor passes a camera scope into your nose that looks at your throat while you eat and drink different foods and liquids.

What are possible complications of dysphagia?

- Aspiration Pneumonia- If food or liquids are passing into the person's windpipe and going into his/her lungs, the person may be at risk of developing pneumonia.
- Weight Loss/Malnutrition-This may occur if the person loses his/her appetite due to fatigue or difficulty with eating or drinking.
- Dehydration-This can occur when the person is unable to or not swallowing enough liquids.