

CONVERSATIONS IN LONG TERM CARE

When a person has trouble eating and swallowing

There may come a time when your loved one has a hard time eating and swallowing, which can affect nutrition status. It is important to know these changes are expected and there are things you can do to help.

Why do people have a hard time eating?

- They may have problems with the action of swallowing which makes it hard to eat.
- They may not feel well (e.g. due to an infection or reaction to a medication).
- The symptoms of an illness (e.g. dementia or Parkinson's Disease) may be getting worse.
- They may have a new illness (e.g. a stroke).
- Decreased intake may be related to natural changes that occur with aging, such as:
 - changes in taste and food preferences
 - feeling less hungry
 - losing the desire to eat
 - feeling full more quickly
 - getting tired when eating.

How will I know if my loved one has trouble swallowing?

Individuals who have a hard time swallowing will often:

- chew food for a long time
- hold food or drink in the mouth
- pocket food in the cheeks
- cough and clear their throat often
- have a wet sounding voice or breath sounds.

How will I know if my loved one is having trouble feeding themselves?

They may no longer be able to use their fork/spoon and may not be able to sit up well during the meal.

Why are feeding and swallowing issues such a concern?

- There is a risk of food or liquid going down the “wrong way” into the lungs, which can cause a type of pneumonia. This can be very serious for older individuals.
- There is also a risk of choking where the person cannot breathe because a solid item is blocking the airway.
- A person may become afraid to eat due to the risk of choking or coughing.
- Not enough food may be eaten which can cause weakness and illness.

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What does the care team do to help my loved one when this happens?

When a person has a hard time eating and swallowing, the health-care team will work together to help.

- The nurse will look at how the person is managing overall, adjust to changing needs and let other members of the team know when they need to be involved.
- The Dietitian will look at the factors that affect each person's nutrition including both feeding and swallowing issues, and where able, identify the options to enhance intake.
- The Speech Language Pathologist will look at swallowing ability and will help identify the options that make it safer to swallow.
- The Occupational Therapist will look at how the person is feeding themselves and sitting during meals and will help identify the options that make it easier to eat.

Together, the team, along with the person and/or their family will develop a plan that meets the person's nutrition needs and balances safety with quality of life. The health-care team works with the person and family to manage any changes, such as:

- changing texture of food or drink:
 - cutting foods into smaller pieces, mincing it or even mashing the food (known as pureed texture),
 - making drinks thicker to help them go down slower,
 - offering more concentrated foods – with more calories and protein
- having staff help with feeding the person if this is needed
- offering reminder tips such as to eat slowly and take small sips and bites.
- consider changes to seating, positioning, or environmental cues

What can we do when these plans no longer help?

Over time, food will not solve the problem if the person's illness is getting worse. It is important to make mealtimes a pleasant experience and not force people to eat as this is not safe. We respond to cues from each person as to what they need during this time. For example, when someone turns their head away from food they may be communicating that they do not want to eat.

What do I need to know about my loved one's difficulties with eating?

Food is often a way we express love and care, so when a person eats less, this can cause stress and worry. The health-care team works together with each person and their family to figure out what food is best at each stage of care. Please stay in touch with your health-care team and let us know if you have any questions or concerns related to eating and swallowing.

References available on request