



Swallowing Disorders

Why do I have trouble swallowing?

Dysphagia or difficulty swallowing is caused by a variety of disorders, most of which are not alarming. Rarely is dysphagia a sign of a serious health condition such as tumor or progressive neurological disorder. Given time most swallowing difficulties resolve but when they don't you should see an otolaryngologist.

How do we swallow?

We all swallow hundreds of times a day without ever noticing it. Only when a problem arises do we take note. Swallowing is a 4 stage process. The process is outlined below:

- Mastication or chewing.
- In the oral stage the tongue pushes food to the back of the mouth.
- In the pharyngeal stage food is passed through the pharynx into the esophagus.
- In the esophageal stage the food or liquid passes through the esophagus into the stomach.

What causes a swallowing disorder?

- poor teeth
- ill fitting dentures
- a common cold
- chronic mouth dryness
- gastroesophageal reflux
- stroke
- progressive neurological disorders
- the presence of a tracheostomy tube
- a paralyzed or unmoving vocal cord
- a tumor or stricture in the mouth, throat, or esophagus
- previous head, neck, or esophageal surgery

Symptoms

Symptoms of swallowing disorders may include:

- drooling
- a feeling that food or liquid is sticking in the throat during or after a meal or while swallowing saliva
- discomfort in the throat or chest, especially when gastroesophageal reflux is present
- sensation of foreign body or "lump" in throat
- weight loss and inadequate nutrition due to prolonged or more significant problems with swallowing
- coughing or choking caused by food, liquid, or saliva not passing easily during swallowing, and small amounts of food, liquid or saliva being sucked into the lungs

When do I need to see a specialist?

In many cases your family practice doctor can treat common disorders. If he is unable to help you resolve the problem he may then refer you on to a specialist such as an otolaryngologist, a speech-language pathologist, a gastroenterologist, a radiologist, or other for further evaluation and treatment.

What will happen?

The otolaryngologist will ask you to describe the history of your problem. He will then examine your mouth and throat. He will use a laryngoscope to get a good look at the back of your throat. He may order further tests such as a barium swallow. He may suggest medication, swallowing therapy, or surgery. For further information on gastroesophageal reflux or GERD refer to the gastroesophageal reflux sheet.