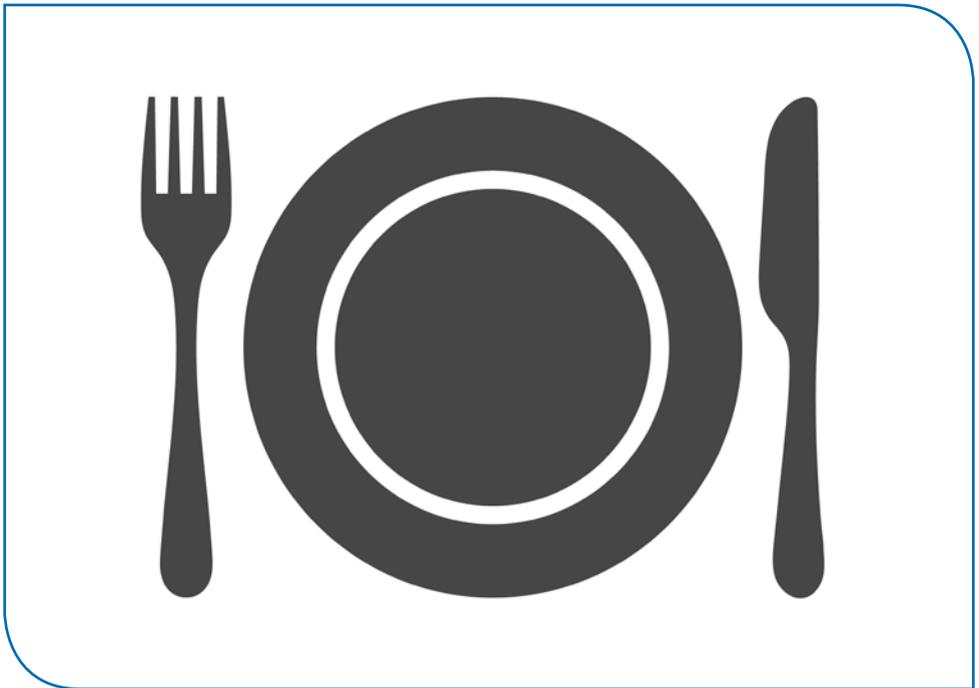


# Dysphagia (swallowing difficulties)

**Information and advice for patients,  
family and friends**

**Speech and Language Therapy Department**



**Patient information leaflet**

This leaflet explains what dysphagia is, why it occurs and advice on how to manage the symptoms.

## **What is dysphagia?**

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This is a medical term for swallowing problems. In some cases this may resolve, but other people may need special adaptations or support so that they are as safe as possible when eating and drinking.

## **Why do people have swallowing problems?**

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There are many different reasons, which may include:

- Weak muscles in the lips, tongue, jaw and cheeks, making it difficult to control and manage food and drinks.
- A neurological event or condition which makes it difficult to start the swallowing response.
- Surgery or treatment to the structures of head and neck, which may alter the way the swallow works.
- Respiratory conditions, impacting the ability to coordinate breathing and swallow in a safe way.
- Being too drowsy to eat or drink safely, or being medically unwell.
- The natural ageing process.

## **What are the risks?**

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If there is a problem with swallowing, there is a risk of food and drink 'going down the wrong way'. This can lead to:

- Choking, where the airway becomes blocked.
- Food and drink going into the lungs (aspiration). This can lead to chest infections and aspiration pneumonia.

## What if someone is Nil By Mouth (NBM)?

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Someone may be placed Nil By Mouth if:

- The medical team thinks their swallow may be unsafe and they are awaiting Speech and Language Therapy assessment.
- They have been assessed, but the risk of food and drink going down the wrong way is deemed too high for them to eat or drink safely at the moment.
- They are awaiting certain medical interventions e.g. surgery.

## How can we help manage swallowing difficulties?

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- **Modified consistencies:** Speech and Language Therapists may recommend specific consistencies of food and drink. Check the sign above the person's bed for recommendations. If you are not sure, please ask a nurse.
- **Good posture:** Ensure they are seated as upright as possible, and that their head is supported if needed.
- **Slow down:** Offer small amounts and allow plenty of time before the next mouthful.
- **Environment:** Feeding should be relaxed and enjoyable. Try to cut down distractions (e.g. turn off the radio, and avoid talking to the person while they are eating and drinking).

Your Speech and Language Therapist can give you specific strategies or exercises to help.

Contact the Speech and Language Therapy team if you have any questions or concerns. Please see contact details overleaf.

## Reference sources

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- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/swallowing-problems-dysphagia/>
- <http://dysphagia.org.uk/info-for-patients/>
- [https://www.rcslt.org/clinical\\_resources/dysphagia/overview](https://www.rcslt.org/clinical_resources/dysphagia/overview)

## Contact details

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Please contact the Speech and Language Therapy department if you have any questions or concerns:

**Telephone:** 01483 571122 **ext** 4680

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## PALS and Advocacy contact details

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Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

**Telephone:** 01483 402757

**Email:** [rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net)

**Opening hours:** 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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