

Swallowing Difficulties and PD

Why is it important?

Nearly all people with Parkinson's disease (PD) develop some degree of difficulty swallowing. Swallowing difficulties can present at any stage of PD, from early to late. Difficulty swallowing can make eating and drinking less pleasurable, affect overall health and nutrition and negatively affect quality of life and desire to participate in social events. In addition, problems with swallowing can result in food, liquid or saliva entering the lungs, a process called *aspiration*. Repeated episodes of aspiration can lead to *aspiration pneumonia*, the primary cause of death for people with PD.

Causes and symptoms of swallowing problems in Parkinson's

Safe and efficient swallowing is dependent on specific and coordinated movement of the muscles involved in swallowing. In the same way that PD can cause you to experience slowness, rigidity, tremor, and difficulty with initiation of movement, it can do the same to your ability to swallow. Phases of swallowing include the oral phase (food preparation/chewing), the pharyngeal (moving food from the mouth to the esophagus), and the esophageal (movement of food to the stomach). You may experience one or more of the following symptoms of swallowing problems at varying levels of severity:

- Coughing or throat clearing during meals
- Choking
- Difficulty moving food or liquid from the front of the mouth to the back
- Loss of liquid or food from the front of the mouth
- Drooling
- Slowed chewing
- Increased time required to eat a meal
- Feeling food sticking in the throat
- Increased difficulty swallowing pills
- Wet or gurgly voice quality during or after eating
- Weakened cough or changes in voice

High Risk Swallowing Concern – Silent Aspiration

Silent aspiration occurs when food or liquid (including your own saliva) enter the lungs WITHOUT any outward signs or symptoms such as coughing. Silent aspiration can occur secondary to problems associated with the swallowing mechanism, such as decreased sensation, slowed motor function, general weakness, decreased coordination, and weak or absent cough. Symptoms of silent aspiration can include, but are not limited to: wet sounding voice especially with eating, absence of coughing or throat clearing, chest congestion, fever, and pneumonia.

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Parkinson Society British Columbia

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Evaluation and treatment

Swallowing difficulty should be evaluated and treated by an experienced Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP). You would benefit from participation in a videofluoroscopic swallowing study (VFSS), also referred to as a Modified Barium Swallow (MBS) (a video x-ray that examines all phases of swallowing), or a Flexible Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES) which does not require radiation exposure. This study will help the SLP **create a safe swallowing program specific to the concerns with your swallowing**. Swallowing treatment plans are **highly individual** and should be created specifically for you following evaluation. Treating swallowing problems can include rehabilitative exercises and/or compensatory strategies.

Discuss any eating and swallowing difficulties with your physician and request a referral to a SLP for evaluation and treatment of your swallowing symptoms or concerns.

Contact Parkinson Society British Columbia at 1-800-668-3330 or info@parkinson.bc.ca to obtain SLPs' contact information in your community.

Self-help for swallowing

- Eat in an environment free from distraction.
- Always eat sitting upright at 90 degrees.
- Remain upright for at least 45 minutes after eating.
- To avoid the effects of fatigue, try to eat 5 small meals instead of 3 large meals.
- Chew thoroughly. Discuss any changes to your teeth or dentures with your dentist.
- Alternate liquids and solids. Do not wash down food.
- Eat when you are at your best.
- Do not ignore symptoms of a swallowing disorder.
- Ask to receive the Communication and Swallow Booklet by Parkinson Society British Columbia.

Source: Sherri Zelazny, Registered Speech Language Pathologist, Director, Parkinson Society British Columbia Board of Directors

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