

Difficulties with Drinking

You have been directed to this advice because the person you are caring for is experiencing difficulties with swallowing fluids.

Please note: The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists stipulate that a personalised approach should be used with regards to decisions about thickened fluids. Use of thickened fluids should be carefully considered, only after comprehensive assessment, including consideration of patient consent. **This means that we are unable to recommend thickened fluids until a face-to-face Speech and Language Therapy assessment has taken place.** Plymouth GPs have been made aware of this change.

Please follow the guidance below for at least two weeks. Keep a record of the strategies you implement and whether they are helpful. This information will be required if you request further support from the Speech and Language Therapy Team.

Positioning:

- Always sit the person upright, aiming for 90 degrees.
- Sit the person out of bed if possible.
- Use an appropriate chair, cushions, or pillows for support.
- Keep the person's head aligned with their body. Do not allow the head to tilt backwards or to one side.
- Encourage the person to remain upright for at least 30 minutes after drinking.

Alertness:

- Always ensure the person is awake and alert before offering fluids.
- If the person cannot open their eyes and maintain eye opening, stop and try again later.
- If the person fatigues quickly, offer smaller amounts more frequently throughout the day.
- If the person becomes fatigued, discontinue the drink and try again later.

Equipment:

- Always provide drinks in an open cup, mug, or glass.
- Avoid straws, spouted beakers, or sports bottles. Do not give fluids via a syringe.
- Administering fluids via a teaspoon can be used if the person struggles to form lip seal to the cup or if they tend to take large gulps.
- Cups with handles can be helpful to support independence.
- Some people find high-contrast coloured and opaque cups helpful for supporting visual perception.

Environment:

- Reduce environmental distractions, e.g., turn off the TV or radio.
- Minimise unnecessary conversation during drinking.
- Consider offering drinks in a quieter area.

Assistance:

- Encourage independent drinking.
- Provide assistance appropriate to the person's needs, ranging from observation to one-to-one assistance.
- Use verbal prompts to support the person e.g., 'Slow down' or 'Take a small sip' might be helpful.
- If the person does require assistance, trial gentle hand-over-hand support to help them bring the cup to their mouth.
- If full assistance is required, sit level with the person to avoid their head tipping backwards. Offer sips slowly, watching for each swallow before offering more.
- Always talk to the person. Let them know what drink is being offered and advise them of the expected temperature.
- A person's level of support need may vary throughout the day. Adjust the level of assistance you provide, as needed.

Mouthcare:

- Good mouthcare can help to reduce the risk of chest infection.
- Encourage regular mouth care, at least twice per day.
- Ensure the person's mouth is clean and clear before drinking.
- The person's mouth should be cleaned regularly, even if they clean their dentures separately. Use a soft toothbrush and standard toothpaste to clean the mouth, including the gums, tongue, and inside of the cheeks.
- If needed, provide support with mouth care.

If the person is drinking too quickly:

- Use verbal prompts to encourage a slower rate of drinking. Phrases such as 'Slow down' or "remember to swallow" may be helpful.
- Encourage the person to take one sip at a time.
- Allow additional time for each swallow before offering more.
- Consider offering drinks via a teaspoon if the person struggles to control the amount they are taking.
- A regulating cup might be helpful (e.g., the Provalve regulating drinking cup).

If the person is holding fluid in their mouth or not swallowing fully:

- Provide close supervision due to increased risk.
- Use verbal prompts to encourage the person to swallow.
- Watch closely and wait for a swallow before offering more fluid.
- Allow additional time.
- If they still do not swallow, bring an empty spoon or cup to their mouth to see whether this helps trigger a swallow.
- Always check that the mouth is clear before offering more fluid.
- Do not allow the person to fall asleep with fluid remaining in their mouth.

If the person does not drink enough:

- Adopt a 'little and often' approach.
- If the person can drink independently, support them to set drink reminders on their phone or watch, or use high visibility poster prompts.
- Offer the person their favourite drinks.
- Provide regular prompts and encouragement.
- Use a highly visible cup and ensure that it is placed in the person's line of vision (bright colours and opaque cups can be helpful).
- Offer water-rich foods e.g., fruits and vegetables (if they are an appropriate consistency for the person's diet recommendations).

Further Advice:

- Consider the temperature of drinks. The person might find hot or cold drinks easier.
- Never rush the person when they are drinking.
- Always support drinking in a dignified and respectful manner.
- Respect the person's personal and cultural preferences.
- Always talk to the person and explain what is happening.
- Listen to the person's concerns and record any observed or reported difficulties.
- If you are concerned about aspiration, offer the person water only. Water is pH neutral and is more efficiently cleared by the lungs.
- Keep a drink diary and record any drinks and times of day that are easier or more difficult.

Remember:

Trial these recommendations for at least two weeks and keep a record of the outcomes. This information will be helpful should further support from the Speech and Language Therapy Team be required.