

Difficulties with Eating

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

If the person is drowsy, fatigued, or not fully alert:

- Always ensure the person is awake and alert before offering food.
- 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.
- Be aware that swallowing ability may fluctuate with fatigue. A person's support needs may vary throughout the meal.

If the person has difficulty maintaining a safe posture:

- Always sit the person upright, aiming for 90 degrees.
- If possible, sit the person out of bed.
- 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 eating.

If the person is eating too quickly:

- Use verbal prompts to encourage a slower rate of eating. Phrases such as 'Slow down' or 'Remember to swallow' may be helpful.
- Encourage the person to put their cutlery down between each mouthful.
- If verbal prompts are unsuccessful, try gentle hand-over-hand support to help slow the person's pace.
- Swap to smaller cutlery, e.g., a teaspoon or small fork, to reduce the size of each mouthful.
- If the person is still eating too quickly, try only putting a small amount of food on their plate at a time. Top their plate up throughout the meal.

If the person becomes distracted during meals:

- Reduce environmental distractions, e.g., turn off the TV or radio.
- Avoid conversation at mealtimes. If the person is talking, their airway is open, increasing the risk of aspiration or choking.
- Consider offering meals in a quieter area.
- Use verbal prompts to encourage the person to focus on eating and swallowing.

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

- Provide close supervision due to an increased risk of choking.
- Use verbal prompts to encourage the person to swallow.
- Watch closely and wait for a swallow before offering more food.
- 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 person's mouth is clear before offering more and at the end of the meal.
- Do not encourage the person to 'wash food down' with a drink.
- Do not let the person fall asleep with food in their mouth.
- If they do not swallow and are falling asleep, gently use a toothbrush to remove any food residue from their mouth.

If the person requires assistance with eating:

- Encourage independent eating.
- Provide assistance appropriate to the person's needs, ranging from observation to one-to-one assistance.
- Use verbal prompts to support the person.
- If the person does require assistance, trial gentle hand-over-hand support to help them bring the spoon or fork to their mouth.
- If full assistance is required, sit level with the person to avoid their head tipping backwards. Feed the person slowly, watching for each swallow before offering more.
- Always talk to the person. Let them know what is happening and what food is being offered, e.g., 'I am here to help with lunch.' 'This next spoonful is mashed potato.'
- A person's level of support need may vary throughout the meal. Adjust the level of assistance you provide, as needed.

If the person is having difficulty managing their current food texture:

- Consider a downgrade of food texture using the IDDSI framework. Trial the next more supportive food texture, as follows:

IDDSI Level 7 Regular → IDDSI Level 7 Easy to Chew

IDDSI Level 7 Easy to Chew → IDDSI Level 6 Soft and Bite-Sized

IDDSI Level 6 Soft and Bite-Sized → IDDSI Level 5 Minced and Moist

IDDSI Level 5 Minced and Moist → IDDSI Level 4 Puree.

- Do not downgrade more than one texture.

If the person has poor oral hygiene or ill-fitting dentures:

- Good mouthcare can help to reduce the risk of chest infection.
- Encourage regular mouthcare, at least twice per day.
- Ensure the person's mouth is clean and clear before eating.
- Check that their dentures fit comfortably and securely. Use Fix-o-dent, if appropriate.
- The person's mouth should be cleaned even if they have dentures that are cleaned separately. Use a soft toothbrush and standard toothpaste to clean the mouth, including the gums, tongue, and inside of the cheeks.
- Check the person's mouth is clear after eating. If needed, provide support with mouthcare.

Further advice:

- Serve food at an appropriate temperature, i.e., avoid food that is too hot and do not let food get cold (a 'keep-warm' plate could help if the person is a slow eater).
- Never rush mealtimes.
- Always provide support with eating in a dignified and respectful manner.
- Respect the person's personal and cultural preferences and taste.
- Avoid unnecessarily mixing foods together, unless this is the person's preference (i.e., if serving a Puree Diet, blend each part of the meal separately).
- Always talk to the person. Let them know what is happening and what food is being offered.
- Listen to their concerns and record any observed or reported difficulties.
- Keep a food diary and record any foods and times of day that seem easier or more difficult.

Remember:

Trial these recommendations for at least two weeks and keep a record of the outcomes. This information will be requested if you require further support from the Speech and Language Therapy Team.