



Swallowing difficulty often occurs in older people, those who take medications that make them very drowsy, or people with an end-stage neurological disease, stroke, weakness, confusion or dental problems.

Normally, when we swallow, food or liquid moves from the mouth to the esophagus and into the stomach.

When we have difficulty swallowing, food or liquid sometimes moves from the mouth to the larynx and then trachea and into the lungs. When this happens, it's called aspiration.

We can aspirate food and thin liquids such as water, soda, coffee, and even saliva.

Sometimes, due to slow digestion, difficulty digesting or other reasons, liquids can back up in the stomach and get into the lungs. When this happens, stomach contents move up the esophagus, into the larynx, down the trachea and into the lungs.

This sometimes happens with tube feedings when our body has stopped absorbing them, and the stomach gets full and backs up. This may also happen when we are in a weakened state, have a weak gag reflex or other reasons, and vomit while taking a breath, causing the stomach contents to go down the larynx.

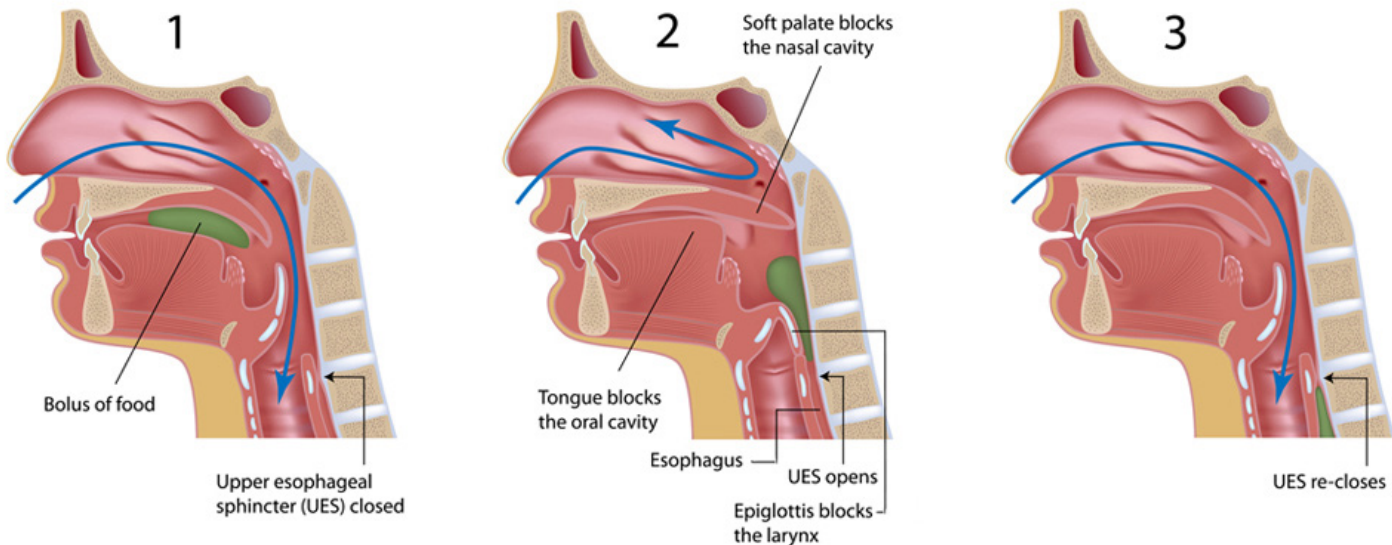
How to improve swallowing:

- Sit upright while eating and for 30-45 minutes after eating
- Give small amounts of food and liquids at a time
- Alternate solids and liquids
- Thicken liquids
- Don't use straws, instead use a cup or spoon
- Cut food in small pieces
- Place food on the left or right side of the mouth, not in the middle
- Tuck the chin down when swallowing
- Make sure everything is swallowed after each bite
- Check in the cheeks for food that has not been swallowed
- Provide mouth care after meals

Questions or concerns?
Call a hospice nurse at 513-891-7700.

Phases of Swallowing

People normally swallow hundreds of times a day when eating solids, drinking liquids or managing saliva. Swallowing is divided into three phases.



Phase 1: ORAL

The **oral phase** is where food is chewed in our mouth and pushed towards the back by the tongue. Broken or missing teeth and ill-fitting dentures may cause problems in this phase.

Signs of difficulty in this phase are:

- frequent drooling while eating
- difficulty moving food around in the mouth
- loss of food or liquids from the mouth

Phase 2: PHARYNGEAL

The **pharyngeal phase** which is where the swallow reflex is triggered. During this phase, we normally stop breathing briefly to make sure that the food or liquid goes down the esophagus and not into the lungs.

Muscles in the back of the mouth move the food towards the throat. Problems in this stage are caused by muscles so weak in the back of the mouth that we cannot push food into the esophagus.

Signs of difficulty in this phase are:

- feeling there is something stuck in the throat
- having to swallow multiple times to move a small piece of food
- coughing or choking when eating
- gurgling sounds in the throat
- frequent clearing of the throat while eating

Phase 3: ESOPHAGEAL

The **esophageal phase** is when food leaves the back of the mouth and travels down the esophagus to the stomach. If the food does not go all the way down or comes back up, there is risk of aspiration into the lungs.

Signs of difficulty in this phase are:

- rapid breathing, increased temperature
- chills, abnormal breathing
- altered mental status

Questions or concerns?

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