

## DYSPHAGIA (EATING, DRINKING AND SWALLOWING SKILLS)

### What is it?

Dysphagia is the medical term used to describe swallowing difficulties.

Dysphagia covers a wide range of difficulties, for example, some children find it difficult to organise food or liquid in their mouth, some children have problems with sensory awareness in their mouth, and some children have difficulties with muscle strength, timing and co-ordination. Swallowing safety is of prime importance as breathing and eating share passageways. The difficulties listed above, as well as many others, can sometimes lead to aspiration (food, fluid, saliva going into or towards the lungs) or choking.

All children require appropriate levels of nutrition and hydration in order to thrive and be healthy.

### Who does it affect?

Eating, drinking and swallowing skills are highly complex and can be caused by a number of reasons and affect a number of people. Some children, particularly those with complex needs, developmental or learning difficulties, may experience dysphagia.

### How is managed?

Dysphagia is now a significant part of the work of many speech and language therapists, particularly in a special school setting. Support to ensure swallowing safely and optimum nutrition and hydration will include:

- texture modification
- providing programmes to develop specific eating and drinking skills
- provide guidelines to outline swallowing difficulties and how to support them
- developing strategies to promote independent eating and drinking
- liaising with other professionals
- providing training

Some children with dysphagia may have alternative methods of eating and drinking such as a nasogastric tube or a gastrostomy tube which feeds food and water directly into the stomach. These children are supported to participate in the social aspect of meal or snack time. They may also eat and drink orally.

The Speech and Language Therapist work closely with parents and school staff to ensure that strategies are followed at home and school in order to support the child to develop their eating and drinking skills to the best of their ability and to minimise any related risks.

### For further information, please contact

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### Links

[www.rcslf.org](http://www.rcslf.org) <http://>

