Trouble Swallowing?

You're not alone!

1 in 25 adults and **up to 30%** of adults aged 65+ experience swallowing difficulties

If you find it difficult to swallow most of the time, you may have a swallowing disorder - also known as ***dysphagia***.

Unaddressed swallowing disorders can lead to serious health concerns including malnutrition, dehydration, lung infection, or death.

Dysphagia: difficulty swallowing food, liquid, saliva, or medication

Common **red flags** include:

- Wet or gurgly sounding voice immediately after swallowing
- Needing extra time to chew or swallow
- Coughing, throat clearing, or choking during or after swallowing
- The need for smaller bites or sips

Dysphagia is not a disease, but it can be a symptom of various health problems including **stroke, brain injury, dementia, ALS, COPD, Parkinson's disease, cancers, and more.**

If you are concerned about swallowing difficulties, an assessment is an important first step toward understanding your condition and exploring treatment options.

ASRL Aging Swallow Research Lab | McMaster University

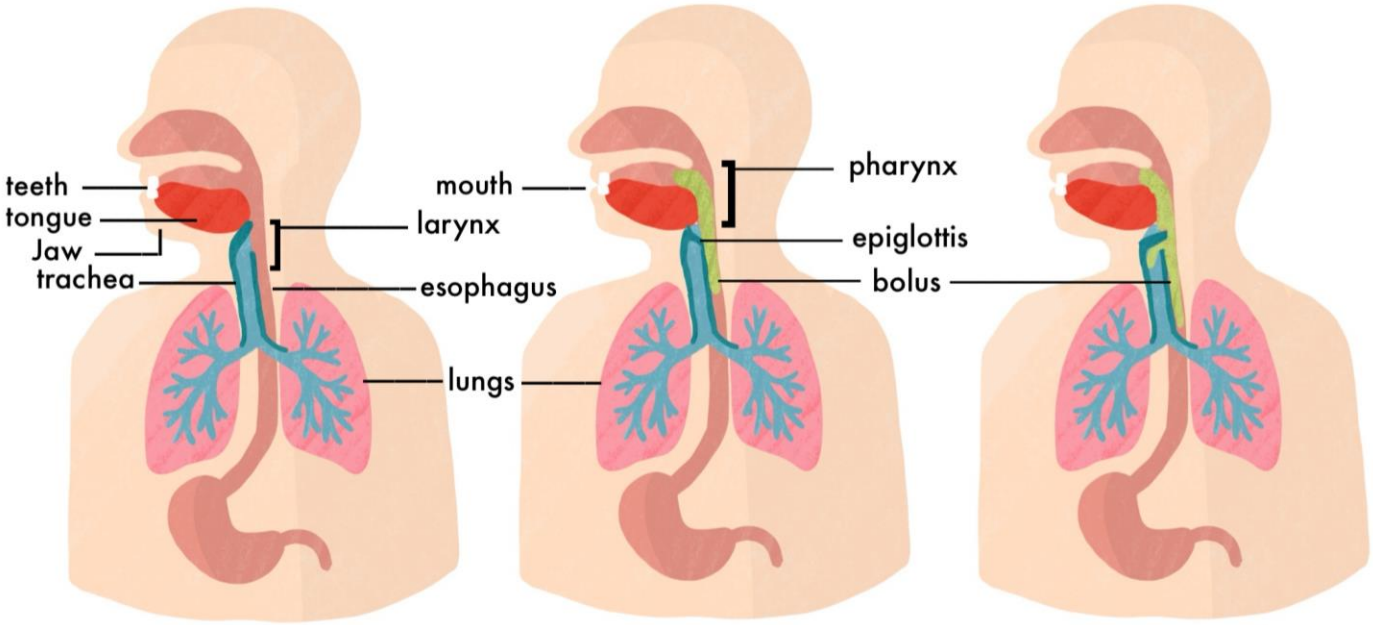
Aging Swallow Research Lab

The Aging Swallow Research Lab studies how and why swallowing difficulties occur with age and illness. If you have trouble swallowing or care for someone with swallowing difficulties, you may be eligible to participate in one of our studies.

If you are interested in being a study participant, contact us at **289-426-0843** or macasrl@mcmaster.ca

For more information about the lab, please visit agingswallowlab.healthsci.mcmaster.ca

Dysphagia



Safety & Efficiency

A swallow should be both safe and efficient meaning:

- No food, liquids or medication should enter the airway
- No material should be left behind after the swallow

Aspiration happens when food, liquid, or medication goes into the larynx ("breathing tube") instead of the stomach. This can make someone cough, choke, or have a wet/gurgly voice after eating or drinking. Sometimes aspiration happens silently, without coughing — the person may just look tired, short of breath, or uncomfortable during or after meals.

Repeated aspiration can lead to serious problems, including lung infections (aspiration pneumonia).

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Management

Medication Safety

- Don't mix pills with thickened liquids (reduces effectiveness).
- Ask pharmacist before crushing tablets.
- Alternatives: smaller doses, liquid formulations, or mixing with applesauce/yogurt if safe.

Treatment & support

Who is involved?

- A speech-language pathologist can assess and treat *dysphagia* by developing personalized strategies to make swallowing easier and safer. They may recommend a swallow x-ray or scope test to see what is happening inside
- An occupational therapist can support feeding independence
- A dietician can manage nutrition needs and dietary plans
- A family caregiver can offer support and assistance at home

For additional support, each month the Aging Swallow Research Lab runs a free, virtual support group for Canadian individuals with swallowing difficulties and their caregivers!

Information will be shared on our social media pages:

@ASRL.McMaster **/McMasterASRL**

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Actionable Tips

Recommendations for preventing dysphagia complications

Take Your Time

Eat slowly, take small bites and sips, and don't rush.

Good Oral Care

Brush teeth, dentures, and tongue at least twice daily. Rinse the mouth after meals to clear food and reduce bacteria.

Positioning

Keep head and neck in a comfortable, neutral position (avoid leaning back).

Watch for Signs

Frequent coughing, throat-clearing, or a wet/gurgly voice after eating may signal swallowing problems — tell a healthcare provider.

Sit Upright

Sit as upright as possible (in a chair or supported in bed) while eating and for at least 30 minutes after.

One Thing at a Time

Avoid talking while chewing or swallowing, and reduce distractions (e.g., TV, talking).

Food Adjustments

Choose moist, easy-to-chew foods when possible, and take sips of liquid between bites.

Stay Alert

Only eat or drink when awake and alert; avoid eating if overly tired, drowsy, or distracted.

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