

# Speech and Language Therapy: How to support someone with their swallowing as they approach end of life

A guide for carers



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As someone approaches end of life, a lot of changes happen to their eating and drinking. This is a normal part of the process. Here are some of the things you may notice happening:

- Reduced appetite, with only small amounts of food and fluids being accepted
- More frequent refusal of food and fluids. This may be shown non-verbally, e.g. turning head away from a cup/spoon, clamping mouth shut
- Increased dependence on others to feed them
- Falling asleep during feeding
- Holding food and fluid in the mouth for a long time. It may take a long time to swallow
- Pouching food in the cheeks rather than swallowing
- Spitting out food and fluids
- A dry mouth and tongue
- Difficulty coping with saliva (e.g. drooling)
- Coughing during or following food and fluids
- Very variable eating and drinking habits. For example, at certain times they may take a drink well, whereas at other they refuse completely, or hold it in their mouth without swallowing.

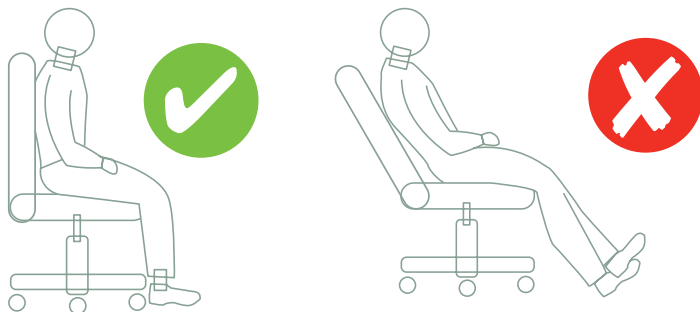
There are a number of ways you can support someone with their eating and drinking at this time.

In this guide there is information about: the person's positioning (pages 3-4); feeding (pages 4-5); food and fluids textures (pages 5-6) and mouth cares (pages 6-7).

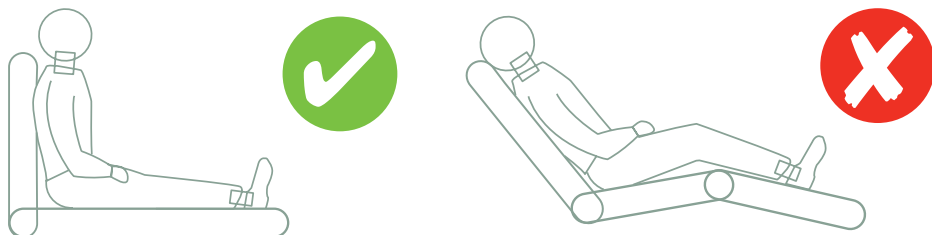
## Positioning

The position someone is in while they eat and drink has a big impact upon their swallowing function, comfort and safety.

- Ideally, a person should be **sitting bolt upright in a chair or bed**, well supported with pillows etc. before they are offered anything to eat or drink, for example:



- If this is painful or uncomfortable for someone to achieve, they may need to be more reclined during feeding. **Aim to achieve an upright a position as possible** before offering any food or fluids
- Ideally, keep them in this position for 30-60 minutes after meals and drinks to stop the risk of reflux. Reflux is when food and drink 'come back up' the food pipe (the oesophagus). People may cough on this refluxed material
- If someone is **less than 30 degrees upright in a chair or bed, do not feed them**



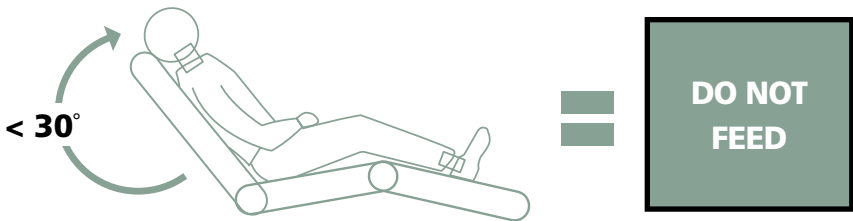
- Instead, offer mouth care to ensure their mouth is moist and comfortable (see Mouth Care on page 10 for further information). Try feeding them again later.

## Feeding

How someone is fed has an enormous impact on their comfort and safety when swallowing.

- How to feed:
  - Offer only **very small amounts** at a time (e.g. by a teaspoon)
  - **Allow a long time for each mouthful** to be chewed, enjoyed and swallowed
  - After a mouthful has been swallowed, **allow a long pause**, to ensure breathing is clear, steady and settled
  - If you hear wet, rattley or fast breathing, **stop feeding immediately**. Support the person to maintain an upright position, and encourage them to cough if they are able
  - **Only re-commence offering food and fluids when any coughing, wet, rattley or fast breathing has ceased, and the person's breathing has returned to normal.**
- Managing refusal of food and drink:
  - If someone has their eyes closed, hold the food or drink below their nose so they can smell it and/or feel the heat of it. This may prime them to swallow. **If they still do not respond, do not feed them at this time**
  - Try **offering an empty spoon**: hold the empty spoon to the person's lips, and place it gently in their mouth if they open their lips to accept it. This may then prime them to take some food or drink

- If someone does not open their mouth when presented with a cup/spoon, try placing a tiny amount of a moist food on their lips (you can do this with a teaspoon or gloved fingertip), to try and prime them to eat. Sweet pureed foods such as jam, honey, chocolate mousse and fruit yoghurt often work well
- **Do not force someone to eat and drink if they are not tolerating it or continue to refuse**
- If someone is **less than 30 degrees upright in a chair or bed, do not feed them**



- Instead, offer mouth care to ensure their mouth is moist and comfortable (see **Mouth Care** on page 6 for further information). Try feeding them again later.

## Food and fluid textures

Certain foods are easier to manage than others and may be swallowed better than others.

- It is likely that hard, dry, crumbly, tough and chewy diet textures are very tiring to chew, and therefore take a long time to be prepared ready for swallowing. These difficult textures also require more muscle strength for the throat to swallow, and so are more likely to stick or cause coughing. It is therefore best to **avoid these difficult textures**

- Moist, well mashed foods are much easier to chew and swallow, and so tend to be better tolerated. They often cause fewer difficulties. See Minced and Moist Diet (Level 5) for further information on these diet textures
- If mashed foods are still very difficult to chew, try pureeing/blending them. See Pureed Diet (Level 4) and Liquidised Diet (Level 3) for further information on these diet levels
- Only offer **small amounts at a time** (e.g. teaspoons, half-teaspoons)
- Try offering food and drink flavours that the individual has always historically enjoyed
- Sweet foods and drinks may be more readily accepted. Try a range of flavours
- Offer food and drink **'little and often'**. Focus on food and drink as being enjoyable, to enhance their quality of life
- If someone appears to have difficulties with thin drinks (e.g. dribbling them or coughing with them), offer naturally thick drinks such as smoothies and milkshakes. Slightly thicker fluids are sometimes easier to control and swallow. See Slightly Thick Fluids (Level 1) leaflet for further information on these fluid textures
- If fluids are difficult for someone to drink, try offering them from a teaspoon.

## Mouth Care

Keeping a person's mouth clean and moist is very important in ensuring their comfort and swallowing safety.

- **How to carry out mouth care:**
  - Use a small, soft infant's toothbrush.
  - If tolerated, tilt the person's head forwards slightly

- Use a high fluoride, low or non-foaming toothpaste ('Colgate Duraphat'; 'BioXtra'; 'Oranurse' and 'Biotene' are brands available from pharmacies)
  - Brush over the tongue blade, starting at the back and moving forwards
  - Brush gently over the roof of the mouth, starting at the back and moving forwards
  - Brush around the inside of the cheeks
  - Brush under the tongue, and around all teeth/gums, starting from the back and moving forwards.
- If someone wears dentures, clean their mouth as well as their dentures
  - If someone's mouth is very dry – to the point of discomfort – offer regular small sips of fluids, and ask the GP for a water-based moisturising spray or gel (e.g. 'Oralieve')
  - Put a moisturising agent such as lip salve or Vaseline onto their lips to avoid chapping and cracking
  - Carry out mouth care **at least twice a day**. If someone only tolerates mouth cares for a short amount of time, try them **little and often**.

If you have further questions regarding managing someone's health, chest status or pain levels, contact their GP immediately.

If you need further advice about how to manage their swallowing, contact the community Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) team on **01302 796336**.

If you would like this in large print, braille or on audiotape or would like this document in an alternative language, please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 0800 015 4334.

#### Amharic

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#### Arabic

إذا أردت الحصول على هذه الوثيقة بالخط الكبير أو بلغة برايل أو على هيئة شريط صوتي أو مترجمة إلى لغة بديلة فيرجى الاتصال بخدمة التنسيق ونصيحة المريض Patient Advice and Liaison Service على رقم الهاتف 0800 015 4334 .

#### Bengali

আপনি যদি এটা বড় অক্ষরের ছাপায়, ব্রেইল-এ, বা কানে শোনার টেইপ-এ পেতে চান অথবা আপনি যদি এই কাগজটা অন্য কোন ভাষায় পেতে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে 0800 015 4334 নম্বরে পেশেন্ট এ্যাড্‌ভাইস এন্ড লিয়েজঁ সার্ভিসের সাথে যোগাযোগ করবেন।

#### Cantonese (traditional Chinese)

如果你希望本文件是采用大字印刷、盲文或录音磁带等格式，或者希望本文件是使用其它的语言，请联络病患建议与联络服务（Patient Advice and Liaison Service），电话号码：0800 015 4334。

#### Czech

Pokud byste chtěli dokument psaný většími písmeny, brailovým písmem nebo na zvukové kazetě nebo v jiném jazyku, prosím, kontaktujte poradenskou službu pacientům na tel. 0800 015 4334.

#### Farsi

در صورت تمایل به داشتن این سند به نسخه ای با چاپ درشت تر، به خط بریل یا نسخه صوتی، و یا به زبانی دیگر، لطفاً با دفتر خدمات مشاوره و هماهنگی بیماران به شماره تلفن ۰۸۰۰۰۱۵۴۳۳۴ تماس حاصل نمایید.

#### French

Si vous désirez ce document en gros caractères, en braille, enregistré sur cassette audio ou dans une autre langue, veuillez contacter le service de conseils et liaison des patients [Patients Advice and Liaison Service] au 0800 015 4334.

#### Kurdish Sorani

ئەگەر تۆم زانیاریاتە بە چۆنی گەورە، برائیل یان ئەسەر شریتی دەنگی دەخوازیت یاخود تۆم بەلگەنامەیە بە زمانێکی دیكە دەخوازیت، تکیە پەیوەندی بکە بە خزمەتگوزاری زینمایی و هاوئاھەنگی نەخۆشایە بە ژمارە 0800 015 4334.

#### Polish

Jeżeli dokument wymagany jest w wersji drukowanej dużą czcionką lub alfabetem Braille'a, na kasecie audio lub w innym języku, prosimy o kontakt z zespołem ds. kontaktów z pacjentami (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) pod numerem telefonu 0800 015 4334.

#### Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਸ ਨੂੰ ਵੱਡੀ ਛਪਾਈ, ਬ੍ਰੇਲ ਜਾਂ ਸੁਣਨ ਵਾਲੀ ਟੇਪ ਤੇ ਚੁੱਟੇ ਹੋ ਜਾਂ ਇਸ ਸਲਾਹਕਾਰੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਵਿੱਚ ਚੁੱਟੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਮਰੀਜ਼ ਸਲਾਹ ਅਤੇ ਤਾਲ-ਮੇਲ ਸੇਵਾ (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) ਨਾਲ 0800 015 4334 ਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

#### Somali

Haddii aad jeclaan lahayd in aad kan ku hesho far waaweyn, farta braille ee dadka indhaha la' ama cajalad dhegeysi ah ama haddii aad jeclaan lahayd in aad dukumeentigan ku hesho luqad kale, fadlan Adeegga Talobixinta iyo Xiriirinta ee Bukaanleyda (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) kala soo xiriir lambarka 0800 015 4334.

#### Turkish

Bu belgeyi büyük yazı, braille (kör alfabesi) veya ses kaydı olarak veya başka bir dilde almak istiyorsanız, lütfen 0800 015 4334 no.lu telefondan Hasta Danışmanlık ve İrtibat Hizmetleri ile bağlantıya geçiniz.

#### Urdu

اگر آپ یہ بڑی چھپائی، بریل میں یا صوتی ٹیپ پر حاصل کرنا چاہیں یا یہ دستاویز کسی قابل زبان میں پڑھیں تو براۓ کرم پیسٹ ایڈوائس سروس سے رابطہ کریں۔ 0800 015 4334 پر رابطہ کریں۔

#### Vietnamese

Nếu muốn có tài liệu này dưới dạng in chữ cỡ lớn hơn, chữ nổi braille hay bằng ghi âm, hoặc bằng một ngôn ngữ khác, xin quý vị liên hệ bộ phận Dịch vụ Tư vấn và Liên lạc với Bệnh nhân theo số 0800 015 4334.

This information is correct at the time of publishing  
Last Reviewed: April 2024