Dysphagia

What is dysphagia?
Dysphagia means that you have problems when you swallow. You may not be able to swallow at all or you may have problems with certain foods, liquids, pills and/or your saliva. Swallowing problems can cause concern because it may affect your health.

What are the signs and symptoms of dysphagia?
- Coughing or choking during or after you eat or drink
- Food staying in your mouth after you swallow
- Food or liquid leaking from your mouth
- Feeling like food is stuck in your throat or chest
- Drooling
- Repeat pneumonias
- Hoarse or wet gurgling voice
- Pain when you swallow
- Heartburn
- Gagging or vomiting
- Losing weight without trying
- Not drinking enough fluid

Sometimes symptoms are not obvious but there may still be swallowing problems. Signs to watch for are:
- Changes in your lungs and breathing (pneumonia, or having a hard time breathing after eating or drinking)
- Changes in your voice, such as gurgling voice, weaker voice or no voice at all
- Problems being awake enough to eat a meal

What are possible problems?
- May not be able to drink enough fluids
- Pneumonia
- Poor nutrition
- Weight loss
- Feeling very tired
- Weakness
- Longer hospital stay

How is a swallowing problem diagnosed?
If your doctors or nurses think you have a problem, they will ask a swallow therapist to check your swallow.

What is a bedside swallow test?
A licensed speech-language therapist (swallow therapist) from the UW Voice and Swallow Clinic will come to your room to test your swallow. You will sit upright in your bed or in a chair. They will check to see if you are able to swallow water, semi-solid and solid foods. They may feel your neck while you swallow. While you swallow, the therapist will watch and listen for signs of problems. If the therapist thinks that you have swallow problem, they may do one of the tests below.

What is a videofluoroscopic swallow study (VFSS)?
You will go to the Radiology Department for this test. During this test, you will swallow barium liquids, semi-solid and solid foods, and possibly pills. While you swallow, a video x-ray will be taken of your mouth and throat to see if and where you are having problems.
What is a fiberoptic endoscopic evaluation of swallow (FEES)?
This test is done at the bedside or in clinic by a swallow therapist. You will sit upright in your bed or a chair for this test. A small camera called an endoscope will slide through your nose. This will allow the therapist to look at your throat and watch where the food and liquid are going when you swallow.

These tests will show if and where you are having trouble. If you have a swallow problem, the therapist will tell you the type of diet and fluid textures you need as well as the best way to take your medicine.

Sometimes a person may not be able to eat any food or drink liquids because of the high risk of them going into the lungs.

Prescribed Diet
Based on the results of your swallow study, your diet may be changed to make it easier for you to swallow. Sometimes, certain food textures or thicker liquids can help.

The different solid diet types are
- NPO - nothing by mouth
- Pureed - foods with smooth textures (applesauce, pudding)
- Minced - 1/8 inch cubes
- Diced - 1/4 inch cubes
- Advanced soft – most foods are okay, except sticky and chewy foods
- General – normal diet

Different liquid textures include:
- No liquids
- Honey thick liquids – thickest
- Nectar thick liquids – thinner than honey
- Thin liquids – regular liquid

You may need to have someone with you while you eat. This is to make sure you are swallowing okay.
- 1:1 – constant watching
- Intermittent – someone will check in on you.
- Independent – you can eat on your own

Your medicine may need to be given in a special way. You may need:
- Only liquid medicine
- Crushed in puree – pills will be crushed and put in a pureed food
- Whole in puree – pills do not need to be crushed but will still be given in a pureed food
- Whole with thick liquids – the whole pill is given with a glass of thick liquids
- Whole with thin liquids – the whole pill is given with a glass of water

When you swallow you may need to use special ways to help the food and liquids go into the stomach. There may be positions or feeding methods that help foods or liquids to move safely past your windpipe. The swallow therapist will know if you need exercises to help strengthen the muscles you use to swallow, based on the results of the tests. The therapist and care team will write a plan to manage your swallow problems before you leave the hospital or at an outpatient appointment.