

Eating and Drinking with Acknowledged Risk

A guide to assist caregivers of children with swallowing difficulties make informed choices about what their child eats and drinks

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia means **trouble swallowing**. Swallowing uses the mouth, throat, and oesophagus. Problems can happen at any stage of swallowing and can be mild to severe.

Swallowing problems can cause a **risk to your child's health**.

Possible problems include coughing, choking, chest infections, weight loss and dehydration. Sometimes, these problems need hospital care and can become serious or life threatening.

Eating and drinking is important for your child's growth and development. Sharing meals is also important for family bonding and traditions.



How can a speech pathologist help?

A speech pathologist will check and manage your child's dysphagia. They can suggest ways to make swallowing easier and safer. They might suggest making drinks thicker or changing food textures. These changes can help your child swallow more safely and comfortably. Sometimes, the speech pathologist may recommend that it's not safe for your child to eat and drink.

What does it mean to eat and drink with acknowledged risk?

- Supporting your child to eat and drink, while knowing there are risks.
- Choosing not to give your child modified foods and drinks suggested by their speech pathologist or doctor (some or all of the time).

When might you consider eating and drinking with acknowledged risk?

Your child has a long-term condition and their swallowing is not expected to get better over time.

- You think your child's food and drink choices are more important to their quality of life than their swallow safety.
- You don't want tube feeding for your child or it's not medically appropriate.
- During special times like family events or celebrations.

Things to consider when making your choice:

- Make sure eating or drinking is enjoyable for your child.
- Notice if your child stops enjoying mealtimes.
- Think about how you can still include your child in mealtimes in other ways.
- Your team may suggest changes to your child's seating position or utensils/equipment to make mealtimes easier.
- Your child may have planned treatment or surgery that may be affected if they become unwell.

If you would like to support your child to eat and drink with acknowledged risk, what should you do next?

- **See a speech pathologist:** They will check your child's swallowing and provide strategies, advice, and an eating and drinking plan.
- **Talk with your healthcare team:** Meet with your speech pathologist, doctor, child health nurse or other professionals. They will help you to understand the options, risks and benefits, and to help you make an informed choice.
- **Create a plan:** Your healthcare team will write down your choice and give you a plan with:
 - Ways to reduce risks
 - Actions to take if your child's health worsens
 - Steps for addressing further problems
- **Ongoing monitoring:** Your healthcare team will watch your child's condition and reassess them as needed.
- **You can change your mind:** You can ask to review or change your mind at any time. Your healthcare team will support you and reassess your child as needed.

Who to contact with questions

If you have more questions about eating and drinking with acknowledged risk, please talk with your speech pathologist or healthcare team.

Disclaimer

The information contained in this fact sheet is general in nature and nothing contained in this fact sheet is intended to be used as a substitute for your own health professional's advice. If you have any questions about eating and drinking with acknowledged risk, please discuss this with your speech pathologist or healthcare team.

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