

# Swallowing – Why is it so Important

Eating and drinking is a very big part of our health and wellbeing but what we pay most attention to is the huge part they play in our culture. We often meet for coffee or a meal with family and friends and big occasions always have food and drink as a centre piece.

Many people with physical disabilities experience some difficulties with swallowing. Many are fearful to share these difficulties, worrying about the changes that may have to be made to accommodate swallowing limitations. Some are unaware they have a problem or how important it is to swallow safely.

Many difficulties with swallowing can be managed with simple solutions – a consultation with a speech pathologist can assess swallowing abilities and provide solutions.

People with cerebral palsy (CP) and similar conditions often experience swallowing difficulties from birth, with swallowing ability changing or deteriorating with age. Changes occur for various reasons however it is known that for people with CP, changes in swallowing most often occur from 30 years of age onward.

A person's health can be seriously impacted if they are not able to swallow safely – concerns include:

- Recurring chest infections, often resulting in many rounds of antibiotics and possible hospitalisation
- Difficulties gaining or maintaining weight and tiredness or generally feeling unwell due to lack of food intake and low energy
- Higher than average risk of infection due to lack of nutrients

Signs of swallowing difficulties include coughing or a 'gurgly' voice when eating and drinking, constant hunger or thirst due to lack of food and drink, regular chest infections requiring antibiotics or hospitalisation, or feeling uncomfortable eating and drinking in public. It is recommended you see a speech pathologist for a review if you experience any of these issues.



## Regular Swallowing Reviews are Recommended

Because swallowing changes can happen quickly and without warning, regular reviews with a speech pathologist are recommended for people with physical disabilities.

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