

Dysphagia

The role of the dietitian

Dysphagia refers to difficulty swallowing foods or liquids. Many people living with neurological conditions and injuries, as well as older people and young children, are at risk of dysphagia.

Dysphagia can lead to poor health

Poor health outcomes include:

- Aspiration – a medical term for a person accidentally inhaling an object or fluid into their windpipe and lungs. This can result in infection, inflammation, pneumonia and lung damage;
- Dehydration;
- Poor nutrition;
- Weight loss;
- Reduced quality of life.

People living with dysphagia are at risk of malnutrition and weight loss

People living with dysphagia are often prescribed a texture modified diet such as soft or puréed diet, thickened fluids or enteral nutrition. Those receiving this often fail to meet their nutritional requirements due to a number of reasons, including:

- Disliking the texture or appearance of modified food;
- Decreased food choices;
- Changes to portion sizes caused by modifying food texture;
- Fatigue;
- Positioning (lying or sitting);
- Delays in commencing enteral nutrition;
- Inappropriate oral nutrition supplements or enteral feed regime.



The dietitian's role in dysphagia management

Dietitians check people meet their nutrition care needs whilst adhering to their prescribed texture modified diet. In dysphagia management, dietitians:

- Estimate daily nutrient intake;
- Assess the person's nutritional needs for food, fluid and nutrition;
- Develop a plan specific for each person including dietary and meal pattern change and nutritional supplements as needed;
- Work with speech pathologists and doctors to advise on assistive devices, food texture and liquid consistency modifications, and enteral feeding regimes;
- Provide client and/or family education and counselling;
- Monitor nutrition care plans, and modify as needed.

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