

Dysphagia

Speech & Swallowing Issues in Parkinson's



Dysphagia (not to be confused with dysphasia) is defined as “difficulty or discomfort in swallowing. In layman’s terms it means it takes more time and effort for the body to move food and/or liquid from one’s mouth to their stomach. More than 80% of people with Parkinson disease develop dysphagia during the course of their disease¹.

Swallowing is a vital function of the body; and problems with that function such as malnutrition, choking and/or inhalation of saliva, foods or fluids into their lungs, which can lead to aspiration pneumonia; can be injurious or even fatal. It is essential to speak with one’s treating physician if issues with swallowing are experienced. Treatment of dysphagia may include rehabilitative undertakings, modifications to diet, adjustments to personal behaviors, or some combination thereof.

In terms of diet, modifications to the texture of food may be implemented to allow for safe intake. In terms of rehabilitative and adjustments to personal behaviors, a doctor may refer you to a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) who is a specialist in dysphagia and other speech and swallowing issues. The Speech Language Pathologist will discuss strategies, options and exercises that may help improve your swallowing issues.

Therapies designed to improve swallowing are focused on strengthening muscles and building coordination of the nerves and muscles involved in swallowing. With the direction of a Speech Language Pathologist, the following are examples of exercises that may assist in strengthening and increasing movement of the muscles in the face and throat, which in turn will help make food intake and swallowing safer and easier.

Shaker Exercise²

Helps strengthen muscles and improve ability to swallow.

How to Perform: First, lie flat on your back and raise your head slightly off the ground. Have your head raised high enough so that your eyes are fixated on your toes. Hold this position for a few seconds and then place your head back down. Repeat this same movement a few more times. For best results, do this exercise three to six times throughout the day. Over time, you can increase the duration of the head lift and the number of repetitions.

Hyoid Lift Maneuver²

Helps build swallowing muscle strength and control.

How to Perform: Place multiple small pieces of paper on a towel in front of you. Next, place a straw in your mouth and suck on the straw, allowing the paper to get picked up by the tip of the straw. Keep sucking on the straw as you carry the straw over to a cup, and stop sucking to release the paper into the cup. You should aim to successfully place all of the pieces of paper into the cup. You can start out with just 3 to 5 pieces of paper and slowly increase to around 10.

Tongue Strengthening Exercise³

Helps improve the contact and coordination between the different muscles used while swallowing.

How to Perform: Stick out your tongue as far as you can. Put something flat like a spoon or tongue depressor on your tongue. Push against your tongue with the flat object, and push your tongue against the object. Hold for a couple of seconds. Repeat 5 times.

References:

- ¹ Suttrup, I, Warnecke, T. (2016) *Dysphagia in Parkinson's Disease*. 31: 24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00455-015-9671-9>
- ² Murphy, L, NAPA. (2018). *5 Easy Swallow Strengthening Exercise for Dysphagia* <https://www.napacenter.org/swallow-strengthening-exercises/>
- ³ Johns Hopkins Medicine Health Library. *Swallowing Exercises: How to Do Tongue-Strengthening Exercises*. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/treatment-tests-and-therapies/swallowing-exercises-how-to-do-tonguestrengthening-exercises>