

# Care Gram

## Dysphagia

### What Is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is trouble swallowing. Sometimes dysphagia may happen if you do not chew your food well enough or eat too quickly. Other times, dysphagia may result from a serious medical problem that needs treated quickly.

### What Causes Dysphagia?

A problem in the upper part of your digestive tract usually causes dysphagia. Often, the problem is in the esophagus (the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach), but it can also happen because of an issue in the mouth or throat.

### What Are the Symptoms of Dysphagia?

See your provider if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Unable to swallow
- Painful swallowing
- Feeling that food is stuck in your throat or chest
- Coughing or gagging while swallowing
- Drooling
- Trouble speaking

Go to the Emergency Department if you cannot swallow your saliva and are drooling or have trouble speaking.

### How Is Dysphagia Diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will do an exam and ask you about your symptoms. Your provider may also perform tests such as:

- Barium X-ray – you will drink a thick liquid called “barium solution” that coats the inside of your esophagus before an X-ray is taken. The barium solution helps the doctor better see any problems in your esophagus.
- Swallowing study – you will eat different foods coated in the barium solution. At the same time, X-rays are taken of your mouth and esophagus. The test will reveal any problems with your mouth or throat muscles.
- Upper endoscopy – a thin, flexible tube with a light and tiny camera attached (called an endoscope) will be put through your mouth, down your throat, and into your esophagus.
- Manometry – a small tube is inserted through your nose, down your throat, and into your esophagus. The tube will measure the pressure at different places inside your esophagus and show your doctor how well the muscles that help you swallow are working.



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### How Is Dysphagia Treated?

Your treatment will depend on what is causing your dysphagia. If your dysphagia is caused by a problem in your mouth and the upper part of your throat, your doctor may refer you to a speech or swallowing therapist. The therapist will teach you exercises to help you swallow and may suggest ways to modify your diet. If the problem affects your esophagus, treatments include:

- Esophageal dilation in which the doctor will use an endoscope with a special balloon attached to gently stretch and widen your esophagus
- Surgery to remove any tumors or other abnormal tissue in the esophagus
- Medicines, such as:
  - Proton pump inhibitors to reduce stomach acid
  - Medicines to treat an infection

### Dietary Modifications

Changes in food and liquid texture and consistency may improve the safety and ease of swallowing.

Changes may include:

- **Pureed foods** – blended with added liquids that do not require chewing, such as applesauce, yogurt, moist mashed potatoes, or puddings
- **Mechanically altered** – ground, finely chopped, or minced foods that require minimal chewing, such as orzo pasta, soft scrambled eggs, cottage cheese, and ground meats
- **Soft/moist** – naturally soft foods requiring some chewing and are easily cut into small pieces, such as soft meats, canned fruits, and baked fish; avoid raw vegetables, bread, and tough meats
- **Moderately thickened liquids** – similar in consistency to gravy or honey and available in ready-to-serve packaging or created by using a thickening agent
- **Nectar consistency liquids** – similar in consistency to thick tomato juice or nectar juice; flows more slowly than water

### Other recommendations include the following:

- Remove distractions at mealtime, especially if you need to concentrate on swallowing for safety
- Practice good posture to make sure you are properly positioned when eating, drinking, or taking medications