

# Swallowing

By FRANK C. SNOPE, MD

Swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) occur in 10-15% of individuals with acute poliomyelitis and 10-20% of individuals experiencing the post-polio syndrome according to Terry Molsen a speech pathologist from Ringwood, NJ. Ms. Molsen conducted a workshop on swallowing difficulties at the recent NJ Confer on Post-Polio Syndrome.

Ms. Molsen explained that swallowing was a complex mechanism involving many muscles and nerves in and around the throat. Polio can weaken these muscles, with the result that swallowing problems can arise.

The kind of swallowing problems that can occur in post-polio syndrome are coughing and choking during and after eating, "sticking" in the throat, regurgitation of food, and difficulty managing secretions (e.g., saliva). The type of foods that cause the most problems are tough meats, nuts, popcorn, peanut butter, crisp vegetables (e.g., carrots, apples), dry breads, medications, certain cheeses, and carbonated drinks.

Ms. Molsen provided a list of things that can be done to make swallowing easier:

1. Chew all food well
2. Slow the rate of eating
3. Alternate food with liquids to "wash" food down
4. Take smaller bites
5. Swallow everything before the next bite
6. Swallow several times per bite
7. Eat when less fatigued
8. Eat in a relaxed atmosphere
9. Eat the most difficult food first (when swallowing muscles are less fatigued)
10. Avoid problematic food or prepare it in a way that is easier to swallow (e.g., peel apple, blend carrots, etc.)

In addition to these suggestions, Ms. Molsen also noted that some individuals can reduce swallowing problems by turning the head to the right or left, or tucking the chin down when swallowing.

Finally, Ms. Molsen cautioned that swallowing difficulty is a symptom, not a disease. Any persistent or unusual problems that do not respond to the suggestions given above should be discussed with one's physician. A referral to a speech pathologist for further evaluation may be necessary to eliminate other causes of swallowing problems and to plan proper management.

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