Making over mealtime

Tips for safe self-feeding and swallowing

Many tasks become more complicated, confusing and potentially dangerous as we age or in the situation of a progressively debilitating disease. Loss of vision, muscle control, overall strength, concentration and dexterity can significantly impact a person’s ability to eat and swallow safely. Here are a few suggestions for maintaining independence, safety, nutrition and hydration.

Brought to you by:
Alison E. Dvorak, MS, RD, CDN, Nutrition Assessor and Educator, Senior Resources, Eastern Connecticut Agency on Aging

**Food preparation:**

Use a rubber glove or thick rubber bands around a cup or jar to improve grip for opening or holding.

Purchase or create specialized utensils with larger handles and a rocker knife option. Use foam tubing to create or look for utensils with thicker handles for weak hands. Heavier utensils help to lessen tremors.

Purchase jelly and other condiments in squeeze bottles rather than glass jars.

Plan menus to include finger foods such as sandwiches, cheese cubes, chicken strips and cut up fruits or vegetables.

Try a pie plate or use a pasta dish to keep foods from sliding off. Create an edge or plate-guard to push foods against for loading utensils.

Use rubber pads or mats under plates to prevent sliding. Using bright-solid colored mats will help to distinguish plate and cup locations.

Fill glasses to half full or purchase cups with covers and controlled spouts or straws to prevent spills.

**Tips for swallowing safely:**

Allow plenty of time for meals. Never rush or hurry.

Create a calm environment with minimal distractions such as television or conversations. Concentrate on each step of the swallowing process.

Suck on a little lemon ice or peppermint candy about 20 minutes before the meal to stimulate saliva and appetite.

Sit in an upright position with both feet on the floor. Stay upright for at least 30 minutes after the meal.

Keep chin pointed down as you chew and swallow. This helps to cover your airway during the swallow.

Take small bites of food (about ½ spoonfuls at a time), chew thoroughly and swallow after each bite.

Alternate solid foods and liquids. Completely swallow one before moving on to the next.
**Managing problem situations:**

Try eating a spoonful of applesauce to resolve a persistent cough. The cool, smooth texture can help calm your throat and they can be carried in individual shelf-stable servings.

If you feel that you are choking, close your mouth and try to breathe through your nose. This may help to calm you down enough to clear the problem. Never leave a room or the company of other people. Ask for help by hand signals. Caregivers should learn the Heimlich maneuver.

Consult your doctor immediately if you think you may have aspirated (i.e. the food or liquid went into the lung). Aspiration leads to serious complications such as pneumonia and fever.

Drooling can be an issue, especially with loss of muscle control. Make a conscious effort to swallow saliva before speaking and at regular intervals throughout the day.


---

**Food Consistency and Texture:**

Avoid voids that are common choking hazards such as steak, hot dogs, nuts, seeds and raw vegetables. Dry baked goods which crumble easily should also be avoided.


Avoid foods which may irritate your throat such as vinegar or other sharp flavorings.

Try strained thickened soups, fruits and vegetables by blending in a food processor. Thicken with mashed potato (instant flakes are easy), mashed peas/beans/lentils, chickpeas, cottage cheese, cream cheese, sour cream or yogurt.

Soft whole grain breads with the crust removed can be used for sandwiches with soft fillings. White bread tends to clump and should be discouraged.

Thick spreads like hummus or cream cheese can be enjoyed on crustless bread.

Mashed avocado or banana or pre-made baby foods are easy alternatives.

Use caution with pudding, ice cream, and other dairy items as they may cause increased mucus secretions in some people.

---

**Liquid Consistencies:**

Sometimes liquids need to be thickened in order to prevent aspiration. Thickening the item allows more time to initiate a safe swallow. Make sure to plan for enough liquids in the day to prevent dehydration. Thickening does not decrease the fluid availability but people often don’t consume enough.

Commercial thickening products are available through your pharmacy provider. Some may also offer pre-packaged, pre-thickened items which maintain the correct consistency for a longer period of time.

Use just enough to attain the correct consistency: Nectar, Honey or Pudding-like. Most products will get thicker as they sit so only thicken as needed. Carbonated beverages are usually not well accepted.

Fruit nectars (apricot, pear, mango banana) and tomato juice are naturally thicker forms of juices which may not need additional thickener.

Keep chin down when swallowing anything: food, liquids, pills, etc. Cups with areas cut out to allow room for the nose or sippy-spool cups can prevent spills. Very thick liquids may need to be taken by spoon.