

Tests for Swallowing Problems

This handout describes tests that might be done if you have swallowing problems.

Causes of Swallowing Problems

Swallowing problems can be caused by:

- History of head and neck cancer
- Recent history of having a breathing tube in your mouth or throat.
- New or past problems such as
 - Stroke
 - Brain injury
 - Parkinson's disease
 - Cerebral palsy
 - Multiple sclerosis
 - Myasthenia gravis
 - Dementia
 - Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS)

Signs and Symptoms of Swallowing Problems

Some of common signs and symptoms include:

- Coughing or choking
- Gagging or vomiting
- Trouble chewing
- Weight loss or malnutrition
- Gurgling voice or weaker voice
- Changes in your lungs and breathing after eating or drinking
- Unexplained respiratory (lung) illnesses/infections like pneumonia

If your doctors or nurses think you have a swallowing problem, they will ask a swallow specialist to check your swallow. In most cases, you cannot eat or drink until results of the test are known.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 8/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6589

Clinical Swallow Test

This test is done at the bedside or in clinic by a licensed speech-language pathologist (SLP). You will sit upright in your bed or in a chair. They will check to see if you are able to swallow water, semi-solid and solid foods. They may feel your neck while you swallow. While you swallow, the specialist will watch and listen for signs of problems. If the SLP notices these signs, they may do one of the tests below.

Videofluoroscopic Swallow Study (VFSS)

You will go to the Radiology Department for this test. During this test, you will swallow barium liquids, semi-solid and solid foods, and possibly pills. While you swallow, a video x-ray will be taken of your mouth and throat to see if and where you are having problems.

Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallow (FEES)

This test is done at the bedside or in clinic by a licensed speech-language pathologist (SLP). You will sit upright in your bed or a chair for this test. A small camera called an endoscope will slide through your nose. This will allow the therapist to look at your throat and watch where the food and liquid are going when you swallow.

These tests will show if and where you are having trouble. If you have a swallow problem, the specialist will tell you the type of diet and fluid textures you need as well as the best way to take your medicine.