

Esophageal Swallowing Problems

Symptoms, causes, and tips

Your esophagus is the tube that carries food from your mouth to your stomach. This handout explains the symptoms and causes of swallowing problems. These are caused by problems in the esophagus itself.

What are the symptoms of esophageal swallowing problems?

Symptoms you may have are:

- A cough that will not go away
- Feeling like you have a lump in your throat
- A feeling that food, liquid, or pills stick in your throat or chest
- A hoarse voice
- Belching (burping) often
- *Regurgitating* food, liquid, or pills (they come back up into your mouth after you swallow)



If you have swallowing problems, stay upright when you eat and for at least 1 hour after eating.

What causes these symptoms?

These symptoms can occur when:

- The muscles of the esophagus do not work properly. This can cause food, liquid, or pills to stay in your esophagus for a while instead of moving down to your stomach right after you swallow.
- The structure of the esophagus blocks food, liquid, or pills from going down to the stomach. Sometimes food, liquid, or pills that stick in your esophagus can flow up toward your throat and enter your airway.

How can I swallow more easily and safely?

- Stay upright (either standing or sitting up straight) for at least 1 hour after you eat, drink, or take pills.

- Do **not** lie down, lean back, or lean forward when you are eating or drinking.
- Drink more fluids during the day.
- Put sauce or gravy on dry foods like breads, crackers, and meats.
- Take a sip of liquid after every 2 or 3 bites of food.
- Eat small meals more often, instead of 3 large meals each day.
- Take a few sips of liquid before you eat or take pills to wet your throat and esophagus.

If you keep having symptoms even when you follow these tips, you may need to see a *gastroenterologist* (a doctor who specializes in diseases of the digestive system).

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

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