

Nutrition, Hydration, and Swallowing Problems

Keeping meals safer, easier, and more nourishing

Easy guide for families

Why this matters

Older adults may eat less because of illness, fatigue, swallowing trouble, memory loss, depression, or poor appetite. Caregivers can support strength and comfort by making meals easier, safer, and less stressful.

What you may notice

- Weight loss or loose clothing
- Dry mouth, dark urine, or dizziness
- Coughing, throat clearing, or a wet voice after eating
- Long mealtimes or food pocketing in the cheeks
- Loss of interest in food or fluids

Daily care at home

1. Seat the person fully upright for meals and keep them upright after eating.
2. Offer small, frequent meals, favorite foods, and easy-to-eat choices.
3. Cut food into small pieces or follow texture changes if prescribed.
4. Offer drinks often during the day unless fluids are restricted.
5. Watch for coughing, choking, or signs that swallowing is tiring.

When to call the doctor

- Weight loss, poor intake, or signs of dehydration
- Coughing or choking with meals
- Fever after swallowing problems or repeated chest congestion
- Food or pills getting stuck
- Mouth pain, poor denture fit, or trouble chewing

Call 911 now if...

- The person cannot breathe or speak because of choking
- Blue lips or severe breathing trouble during a meal
- Severe dehydration with confusion or fainting
- Sudden chest pain or stroke warning signs

Questions for the care team

- Do we need a speech-language pathologist to check swallowing?
- What food or drink texture is safest right now?
- How much fluid should we aim for each day?
- Would supplements help if appetite is poor?

Quick daily checklist

- Meals offered in upright position
- Fluids offered often
- Swallowing observed
- Weight or appetite tracked
- Mouth and dentures checked
- Food texture followed if ordered

Safety first

Swallowing problems can lead to choking, dehydration, and pneumonia. If meals are becoming difficult, ask for a swallowing evaluation rather than guessing about food changes.

Caregiver reminder

Make mealtime calm, not rushed. Comfort, safety, and enough nourishment are the goals - not a perfect plate.

