

Close to half of people with multiple sclerosis (MS) experience swallowing difficulties. Identifying this and seeking early treatment is key. With the right information and support, swallowing issues can be managed effectively to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

How MS can affect my swallowing

Difficulty swallowing (also known as dysphagia) may lead to:

- Difficulty chewing food or controlling liquids in your mouth
- Food getting stuck, or feeling as if it is stuck in your throat
- Coughing or choking episodes when eating or drinking
- Difficulty controlling saliva may cause you to dribble
- Food or drink coming back up

This can affect the safety of your eating and drinking, your enjoyment of mealtimes or self-esteem and may cause anxiety.

What causes problems with swallowing?

Chewing and swallowing involves the coordination of various muscles in the mouth and throat, including those which protect your windpipe when food and drink pass through your throat. Muscles can be weakened or the coordination of their movements disrupted by damage to the central nervous system caused by MS. This can also affect the way you sense the presence of food and drink in your mouth and throat.

- If the muscles are weak, chewing can be effortful and tiring and food may lodge in your throat. You may need to swallow several times to clear one mouthful away.
- If the muscle movements are slow or lack coordination, fluid or food particles might enter the windpipe (rather than your stomach), causing coughing which can lead to chest infections and pneumonia.
- If MS has weakened the coughing muscles, it may be more difficult to eject particles and they may enter your lungs (called aspiration, or 'silent aspiration' when something is inhaled without being aware), or cause choking.
- Reduced sensation in the mouth means that saliva is not swallowed away as automatically, which can result in dribble escaping from the lips.

Stress and other MS symptoms such as heat and fatigue may lead to swallowing issues. Mild or occasional difficulties can be present early on in MS and occur during relapses. Significant symptoms are more likely if you have advanced MS.

Dysphagia is diagnosed by examination of the tongue and swallowing muscles, sometimes with a special imaging procedure called a modified barium swallow. This involves drinking or eating samples of different consistencies, such as thin or thick liquids or solids. A video-fluoroscope films the swallowing to pinpoint the location and issue, and assist with potential treatments.

What should I do if I experience swallowing issues?

There are various techniques you, your family or carers can learn to help with swallowing and manage changes effectively, but in the first instance talk to your GP or MS Nurse or ask to be referred to the appropriate specialist.

- If swallowing problems mean it takes longer to eat, try to have meals when you can take your time. Control the amount of food on your fork and the size of your mouthfuls of drink. Chew your food well and try to concentrate on swallowing.
- If food tends to lodge in your throat, taking sips from a drink with your meal can sometimes help. Other useful strategies include smaller meals more often, or having your largest meal when you are least fatigued.
- Using good posture whilst sitting can help you to swallow.
- Be aware of foods more likely to cause swallowing problems, such as crumbly textures. If dry food or 'thin' liquids (quick moving drinks like plain water) are more difficult, find ways to make them easier to swallow, such as altering the mouthful size, cutlery, glass or cup, or how you cook the foods. A speech pathologist can help with this.
- Relax and avoid speaking whilst eating.
- If you are prone to choking whilst eating, try to eat whilst someone is with you who knows how to help – for example, First Aid trained.

What else can I do to manage these symptoms?

Treatments

A speech pathologist can assess how your swallowing is affected and advise on posture and/or head position, food and drink consistencies, eating environment and possible exercises to strengthen muscles involved in swallowing. They may work with their physiotherapy colleagues to help you achieve the posture that makes swallowing easiest and as comfortable as possible, and their dietician colleagues – to advise on ways to maintain your calorie intake and nutrients, or the need to alter food and drink consistencies.

If swallowing problems are more advanced and eating or drinking is putting you at risk of malnutrition, dehydration, choking or severe chest infections, there are other options to provide fluids and nutrition, which you should discuss with your medical and therapy team. One example is a procedure called percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) - a feeding tube inserted into the stomach.

Associated symptoms

Many people with swallowing issues can also have speech disorders, generally treated by speech pathologists.

Dental hygiene

Dental problems can make it harder to chew or swallow, so it is important to have regular check ups with your dentist. A dry mouth (caused by some drug treatments) can affect teeth and gum health, so making adjustments to medication may improve things. Your dentist may recommend a mouthwash or fluoride gel to help avoid problems and can advise on effective brushing.

For more information and assistance, including financial advice:

- **Your GP** should be the first contact for any new and/or persistent swallowing concerns. MS nurses and swallowing advisers can also help you to manage these symptoms on an ongoing basis.
- **Contact your state MS society** (details below) to access services such as MS nurses, peer support and other resources.
- **Independent Living Centres Australia 1300 885 886** www.ilcaustralia.org.au provides product and service information to help people remain independent and improve their quality of life, including eating and drinking aids for swallowing issues.
- **Scope Australia 1300 4 72673** [Gastrostomy Information and Support Service \(GISS\) Workshops](#) teach carers, dietitians, family members and speech pathologists [how to support someone and provide nutrition through a tube](#) (such as a PEG system).
- **Speech Pathology Australia 1300 368 835** www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au provides contact details for speech pathologists including those who specialise in swallowing difficulties.
- **Speech Pathology Australia Dysphagia Interest Groups** (currently in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia) <http://bit.ly/2IGrpaq>
- **Carers Australia 1800 242 636** www.carersaustralia.com.au provides information and advice to carers, their friends and families about carer support and services.
- **Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) 1800 812 942** www.daa.asn.au is the national peak nutrition body representing Accredited Practising Dieticians, including those with expertise in swallowing difficulties (texture modified diets).
- [ILC](#), [DAA](#) and [Speech Pathology Australia](#) outline possible financial benefits, funding support, fees/rebates and funded programs for eligible people, including those with swallowing issues.
- Federal Government agency Moneysmart www.moneySMART.gov.au provides financial advice, including debt help options, during stressful life events with a free **Financial Counselling Helpline 1800 007 007** www.moneySMART.gov.au/managing-your-money/managing-debts/financial-counselling
- Some utility and other services offer payment extensions. Consider a local welfare service for help with payments or the **National Debt Helpline 1800 007 007** www.ndh.org.au/
- Speak to your neurologist and other healthcare providers about the best approach to treatment management for your individual circumstances.
- For information about MS and MS treatments visit www.msaustralia.org.au

■ Contact details for your state MS organisations:

MS Connect (Victoria, NSW, ACT and Tasmania)	1800 042 138	msconnect@ms.org.au	www.ms.org.au
MSWA (Western Australia)	1800 287 367	enquiries@mswa.org.au	www.mswa.org.au
MS Assist (South Australia and NT)	1800 812 311	msassist@ms.asn.au	www.ms.asn.au
MS Queensland	1800 287 367	mssociety@msqld.org.au	www.msqld.org.au

■ Further reading and useful recipes:

www.easytoswallow.co.uk

[I-Can't-Chew Cookbook](#)

[Easy-to-swallow. Easy-to-chew Cookbook](#)

Sources: This fact sheet comprises material from previously published Australian MS Society leaflets plus Multiple Sclerosis (MS) UK Trust online resources (and associated references), and has been endorsed by both a medical expert and a person living with MS.

Disclaimer: This information was prepared by MS Australia. It is intended to provide useful and accurate information of a general nature and is not a substitute for medical advice.