

Oesophageal difficulties

How carers, nurses and family can help

What is oesophageal dysphagia?

Oesophageal dysphagia means **difficulty swallowing once food or drink has left the mouth and throat and is travelling down the oesophagus (food pipe)**. People often describe:

- Feelings of food sticking in the chest area;
- Food moving slowly or some pain after swallowing;
- Food coming back up after swallowing.

This is different from problems at the oral or pharyngeal stages of swallowing.

Possible causes of oesophageal swallowing problems:

- Acid reflux or inflammation of the oesophagus;
- Narrowing of the oesophagus (stricture);
- Muscle or movement problems of the oesophagus;
- Food sticking due to poor clearance;
- Conditions affecting the lining of the oesophagus.

Oesophageal dysphagia / difficulties may require medical management by **Gastroenterology**.

What can help?

Eating and drinking tips:

- Sit upright for all meals;
- Stay upright for at least 30 minutes after eating;
- Take small bites and small sips;
- Eat slowly and avoid rushing meals;
- Chew food thoroughly before swallowing;
- Alternate solids and liquids (sip water between mouthfuls);
- Choose **soft, moist foods** such as: yogurt, stews, mashed or well-cooked foods;
- **Avoid** foods that are very dry or crumbly, tough or chewy.

When to seek medical help:

Contact your GP or seek medical advice if you notice these **red-flag symptoms**:

- Unintentional weight loss;
- Persistent vomiting;
- Food or liquids regularly coming back up;
- Sudden worsening of swallowing;
- Chest pain that is new or severe;
- Choking episodes.

Author: Speech & Language Therapy team

Date created: July 2026

Expiry date: July 2029