

**Department of  
Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation**

**Happy Valley**

Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital  
Speech Therapy Service  
5/F, Li Shu Pui Block  
2 Village Road, Happy Valley, Hong Kong  
Tel: (852) 2835 7156  
Fax: (852) 2892 7568  
Email: pmrehab@hksh-hospital.com  
www.hksh-hospital.com

**Service Hours**

Monday to Friday: 9:00 am - 5:00 pm  
Saturday: 9:00 am - 1:00 pm  
Closed on Sundays and Public Holidays  
Consultation by Appointment



For enquiries and appointments,  
please contact us



# Swallowing Disorders



**物理醫學及復康科部**

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**People with difficulties in swallowing are at risk of poor nutrition, dehydration, pneumonia or suffocation. Swallowing disorders can affect people of any age and can result from various medical conditions.**

## **Common Causes of Swallowing Disorders**

Feeding and swallowing disorders of children may be congenital (e.g. malformations present at birth such as cleft lip and palate) or may be due to prematurity or neurological damage.

For adults, some common causes include:

- Damage to or diseases of brain, for example stroke, Parkinson's disease, and dementia;
- Surgery and/or radiotherapy to the head and neck areas for the treatment of oral or head and neck cancers;
- Respiratory problems and/or having a tracheostomy (a surgical incision made in the trachea) or using a ventilator.

## **Common Signs and Symptoms of Swallowing Disorders**

- Coughing immediately before, during or after eating or drinking
- Wet or gurgly voice immediately before, during or after eating or drinking
- Having the need to swallow many times to clear the food from the mouth or throat
- Effortful eating or drinking
- Long meal times
- Food or liquid leaking from the mouth
- Recurrent pneumonia or fever
- Weight loss or dehydration
- Poor sucking
- Refusing to feed
- Difficulty with chewing
- Difficulty with breathing when feeding

## **Swallowing Examinations**

Speech Therapy can provide assessment and treatment for people with swallowing problems. Specialised swallowing examinations that may be conducted by the Speech Therapist include the following:

### **Videofluoroscopic Study of Swallowing (VFSS)**

VFSS is conducted under x-ray and is done in conjunction with a radiologist. During VFSS, the individual with the swallowing problem is given food and liquid coated in barium to ingest, so that the swallowing process can be seen. The cause of the swallowing problem, whether food or liquid enters the airway when eating, and whether specific techniques can be used to improve the swallowing condition may be explored during the procedure.

### **Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES)**

FEES uses endoscopy and is typically conducted with a specialist doctor to examine one's swallowing ability. A flexible endoscope is inserted through the nose while food and liquids are swallowed, so that the swallowing process can be visualised. Figuring out the cause of the swallowing problem, whether food or liquid enters the airway when eating, and identifying swallowing techniques to aid swallowing are the goals of the procedure.

Based on the findings of the swallowing assessment, the Speech Therapist may discuss treatment and recommendations that may aid safe swallowing with you.

## **Treatment for Swallowing Problems**

After a swallowing evaluation, the Speech Therapist may recommend specific swallowing treatments. The recommended treatments are based on the cause and presenting symptoms of the swallowing problem.

In general, treatment may be in the form of exercises, which may aim to increase the strength of the swallowing muscles, improve chewing ability, and coordinate the suck-swallow-breath pattern. Treatment may also be in the form of recommendations on optimal feeding position, swallowing strategies, modifying food and liquid textures or the use of special feeding bottles and aids to allow for safer swallowing.