From Dr. Escudé...

Swallowing Issues in People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

In people with IDD, swallowing issues can interfere with the ability to maintain an adequate weight, maintain adequate nutrition and hydration, and the ability to take necessary medications. They may also increase the risk of aspiration, which can be life-threatening. People with IDD may refuse to eat or to take mediations because of associated pain or discomfort with the swallowing process. They learn that it hurts or that they experience choking when they swallow, so they attempt to avoid it. Behaviors that you might also see include:

- Avoidance of the dining table or cafeteria
- Aggression around mealtime

Swallowing happens in three stages, or phases. You can have a problem in one or more of these phases. They include:

- Oral phase – sucking, chewing, and moving food or liquid into the throat.
- Pharyngeal phase – starting with swallowing and squeezing food down the throat. Closing off the airway to keep food or liquid out is necessary.
- Esophageal phase – opening and closing the esophagus. Food can get stuck in the esophagus. Or, one may frequently throw up if there is a problem with the esophagus.

General signs of a swallowing problem may include:

- Coughing during or right after eating or drinking
- Wet or gurgly sounding voice during or after eating or drinking
- Extra effort or time needed to chew or swallow
- Food or liquid leaking from one’s mouth
- Food getting stuck in one’s mouth
- Having a hard time breathing after meals
- Losing weight even when intake appears adequate
There are many conditions that can cause swallowing problems. Some medications can cause dry mouth, which makes it hard to chew and swallow. Other causes include the following:

Damage to someone’s brain or nerves from:

- Stroke
- Brain injury
- Spinal cord injury
- Parkinson's disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease)
- Muscular dystrophy
- Cerebral palsy
- Alzheimer's disease
- Problems with the head or neck, such as:
  - cancer of the mouth, throat, or esophagus
  - head or neck injuries
  - mouth or neck surgery
  - bad teeth, missing teeth, or dentures that do not fit well

Testing may include:

- Modified barium swallow – A person eats or drinks food or liquid with barium in it under fluoroscopy.
- Endoscopic assessment – the doctor or SLP can observe swallowing on a screen.
- Mealtime Pulse Oximeter Study - this easy-to-perform test that assesses for a drop in O2 saturation during swallowing or after eating which can indicate the presence of aspiration (**).

A thorough evaluation for swallowing problems may indicate the need for certain modifications to a person’s diet or to types of assistance that may be needed to facilitate good nutrition and to prevent the risk of aspiration.

Thanks for your careful consideration to improving the lives of people we support.

Adapted from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association website

** For more information on this test, visit HRSTonline.com
Dr. Escudé has dedicated his career to providing healthcare for people with IDD and other vulnerable populations and teaches on the subject throughout the country.