



AMERICAN  
SPEECH-LANGUAGE-  
HEARING  
ASSOCIATION

# **Feeding and Swallowing Problems in Children**



# What is a swallowing disorder?

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- A swallowing disorder is also called dysphagia.
- The three phases of swallowing are the oral, pharyngeal, and esophageal phases.
- Your child can have a problem during one or more of these phases.
- Your child can also have feeding problems.

# What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

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- Oral phase problems include
  - ◆ trouble sucking from a bottle or breast
  - ◆ problems coordinating the suck-swallow-breathe cycle
  - ◆ problems closing the lips to get food from a spoon or fork or to keep food in the mouth
  - ◆ trouble chewing or moving food and liquid from the mouth to the throat

# What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

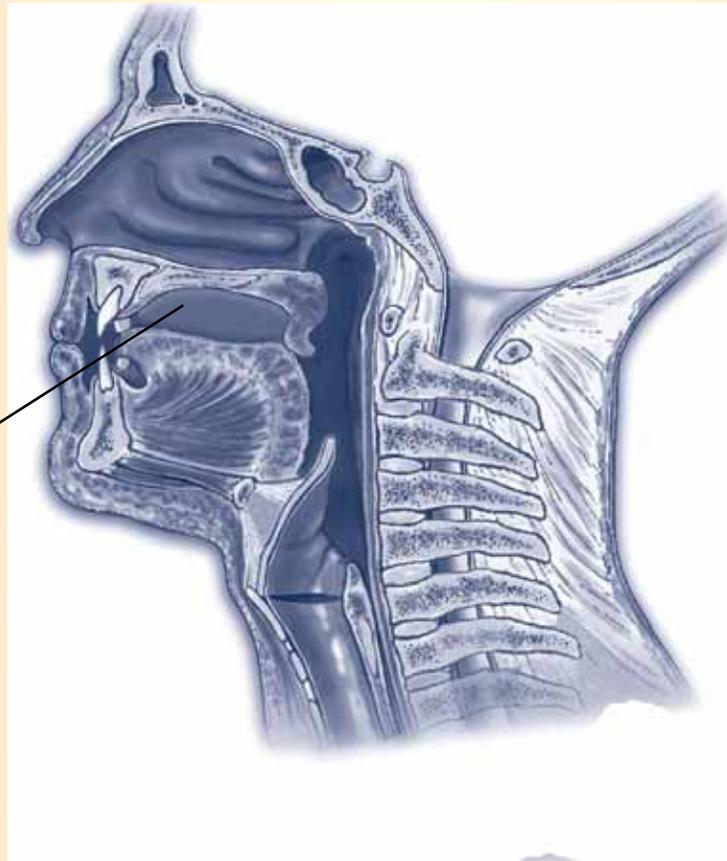
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- Oral phase problems include
  - ◆ not being able to control the food or liquid so that it goes into the throat too quickly
  - ◆ having some food left in the mouth after the swallow, called residue
  - ◆ getting food stuck in the cheek, called pocketing

# Oral Phase

(Adult model for illustrative purposes)

**Bolus**



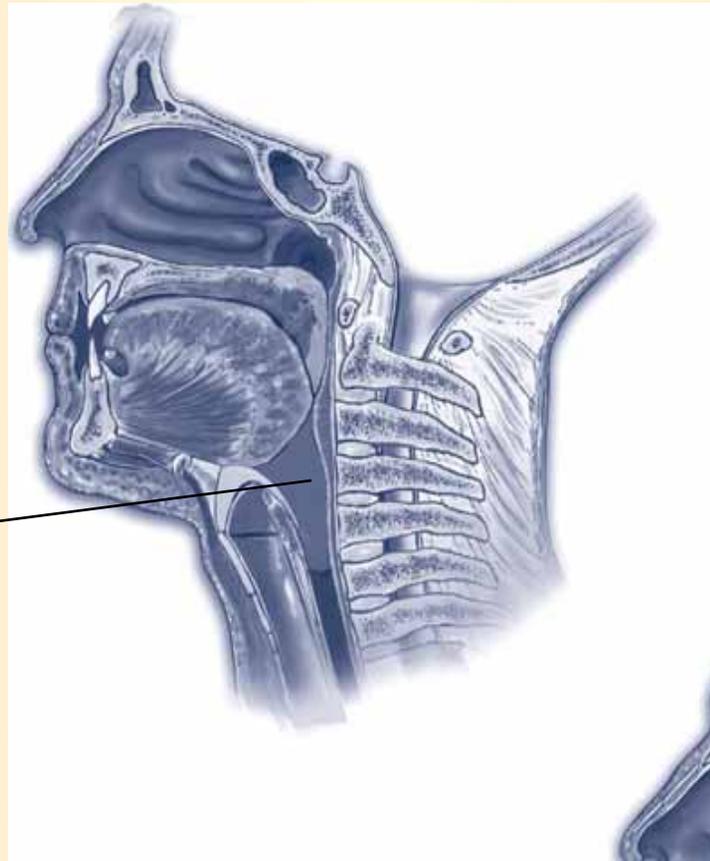
# What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

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- Pharyngeal phase problems include
  - ◆ having a hard time starting a swallow
  - ◆ getting food or liquid into the airway, called aspiration
  - ◆ having some food or liquid stay in the throat after the swallow, called residue

# Pharyngeal Phase

(Adult model for illustrative purposes)



**Bolus**

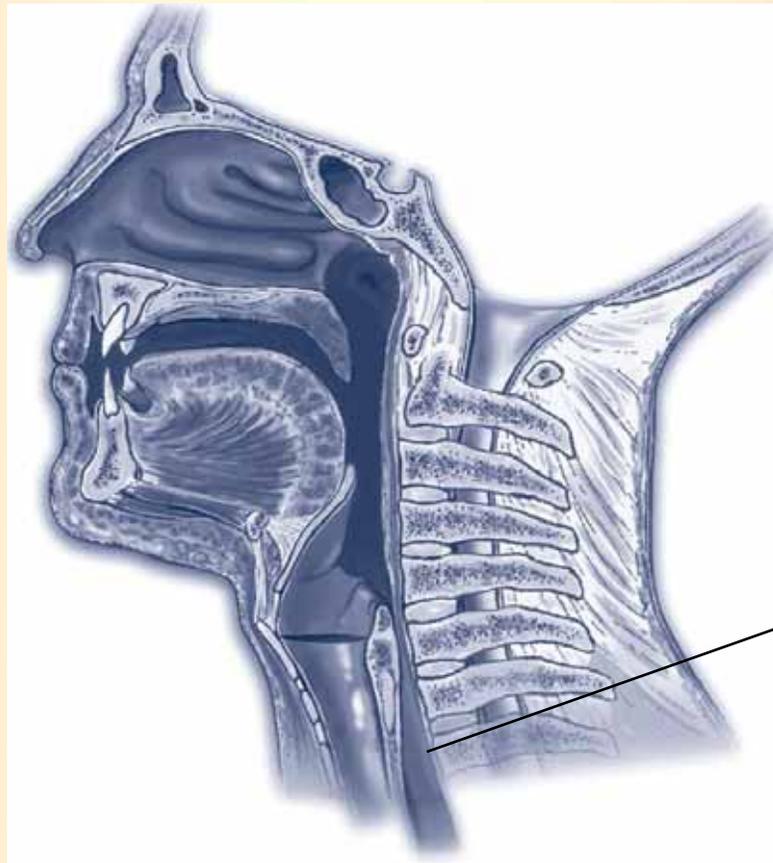
# What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

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- Esophageal phase problems include
  - ◆ food getting stuck as it moves from the throat into the esophagus
  - ◆ poor movement of the esophagus so food doesn't pass easily into the stomach
  - ◆ food coming back up, called reflux
  - ◆ pockets in the esophagus that catch food and don't let it go into the stomach

# Esophageal Phase

(Adult model for illustrative purposes)



**Bolus**



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# What is a feeding disorder?

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- Your child may have trouble eating with his or her hands or from a spoon or fork.
- Your child may also
  - ◆ refuse certain foods, like crunchy or smooth foods
  - ◆ eat only certain foods, like french fries or pizza
  - ◆ gag easily when food is brought near the mouth
  - ◆ have trouble paying attention long enough to eat a meal
  - ◆ take a long time to eat – more than 30 minutes



# What causes feeding and swallowing problems?

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- In children, some causes are
  - ◆ problems with the nervous system from cerebral palsy or other disorders
  - ◆ gastrointestinal problems, like reflux
  - ◆ premature birth and low birth weight
  - ◆ heart problems
  - ◆ cleft lip or palate
  - ◆ breathing problems
  - ◆ developmental disorders, like autism or Down syndrome

# What are the signs of feeding and swallowing problems?

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- Your child may
  - ◆ Arch his or her back or stiffen up while feeding
  - ◆ become irritable or fall asleep while feeding
  - ◆ take a long time to eat (more than 30 minutes)
  - ◆ refuse different food textures (like crunchy or smooth foods)
  - ◆ drool or spill food or liquid from the mouth



# What are the signs of feeding and swallowing problems? (continued)

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- Your child may
  - ◆ sound gurgly or out of breath after eating
  - ◆ cough or gag during meals
  - ◆ get pneumonia or respiratory infections a lot
  - ◆ spit up or vomit after eating
  - ◆ not gain weight



# What can happen if my child has a feeding or swallowing problem?

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- Children need food to grow and develop. A child who has trouble eating may
  - ◆ not get enough food and water to stay healthy
  - ◆ not grow the way he or she should
  - ◆ be at risk for food going into the airway, called aspiration
  - ◆ get pneumonia or respiratory infections
  - ◆ not like to eat in front of others



# What help is available?

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- You should talk with your child's doctor if you have concerns about how he or she is eating.
- A speech-language pathologist, or SLP, can test your child to see what kinds of problems he or she is having.
- The SLP can work with you and your child to find ways to make eating more enjoyable and safe.

# How can an SLP help my child?

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- The SLP may
  - ◆ talk to you about what problems your child is having and what he or she does well
  - ◆ talk with your child's doctor about any medical problems
  - ◆ see how your child can move the muscles of his or her mouth
  - ◆ watch your child eat and drink
  - ◆ do other tests to see what is happening when your child swallows

# How can an SLP help my child? (continued)

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- Treatment will be different for every child and may include
  - ◆ exercises to help your child move his or her mouth better for chewing and swallowing
  - ◆ getting your child to try different positions for eating
  - ◆ getting your child to try different foods
  - ◆ trying different food textures, bottles, cups, spoons, or other techniques to help your child eat safely

# What can I do to help?

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- As parents and caregivers you can help by
  - ◆ asking questions to make sure that you understand what kinds of problems your child is having
  - ◆ make sure you understand the treatment plan
  - ◆ go to therapy with your child and follow up at home with any recommendations
  - ◆ talk with your child's daycare or school teachers about your child's feeding and swallowing and what they can do to help

# How can I find an SLP?

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- Look for an SLP with the Certificate of Clinical Competence from ASHA.
  - ◆ The SLP will have “CCC-SLP” after his or her name.
- Go to the ASHA Web site at [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org) and click on “Find a Professional” at the top of the page.
- Call ASHA at (800) 638-8255 or e-mail [actioncenter@asha.org](mailto:actioncenter@asha.org).



# For more information

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- To learn more about feeding and swallowing problems and what SLPs do, go to ASHA's Web site at [www.asha.org/public](http://www.asha.org/public).