



Autoimmune Resource and Research Centre

Information Sheet

SWALLOWING DIFFICULTIES ASSOCIATED WITH SCLERODERMA

As Scleroderma is a disease of the connective tissue it can effect the co-ordination and movement of the 30 different muscles involved in the complex process of swallowing. This process involves not only the passage of food to the stomach but also the co-ordination of breathing and swallowing to ensure that food and liquids do not enter the lungs. There are a number of complications that may result from swallowing difficulties including pneumonia, dehydration, choking and a loss of the enjoyment of eating and drinking.

Speech Pathologists are involved in the assessment and treatment of swallowing difficulties in the mouth and throat whereas Gastroenterologists treat the oesophageal symptoms that are associated with Scleroderma.

A Speech Pathology assessment includes the examination of the muscles and nerves that are needed to swallow, observation of the person eating a variety of foods and liquids and may also include testing involving X-ray or Fibre-Optics. From the assessment the Speech Pathologist is able to identify areas of difficulty and provide recommendations to help an individual manage their swallowing difficulty (dysphagia). Recommendations may include dietary and postural modifications to ensure safety and ease when swallowing.

Indications that you may need to see a Speech Pathologist about your swallowing include;

- Difficulty in chewing food
- Difficulty moving food backwards in your mouth
- Trouble starting the swallow
- A feeling that food, liquids or tablets are "stuck" in your throat
- Coughing when you are eating or drinking
- Your voice sounds "gurgly" after eating or drinking
- Repeated bouts of pneumonia
- Discomfort on swallowing
- Breathlessness after eating and drinking

If one or more of the above symptoms are present, contact your local doctor regarding a referral to a Speech Pathologist. The Speech Pathologist will assess your swallowing and design a swallowing program to meet the needs of the individual. They will monitor the swallowing problems and make adjustments to the program as needed.

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Speech Pathologists

For more information education and support contact the Autoimmune Resource and Research Centre (ARRC) (02) 49214095

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