

Managing aspiration risk best practices

Features of aspiration:

- Coughing, choking, frequent throat clearing, or wet-sounding voice during or immediately after meals
- Shortness of breath during or shortly after meals
- Prolonged chewing and/or reduced clearing of food from mouth
- Complaints of food sticking in throat
- Prior aspiration or history of dysphagia
- Not all patients who are aspirating will show signs of aspiration (such as coughing), so **silent aspiration** must be considered. This may happen due to decreased sensation in the upper airway due to prolonged intubation or stroke, for example.

Some risk factors for aspiration:

- Stroke; neurologic disorders like ALS, dementia, Parkinson's
- Pulmonary disease, cardiothoracic surgery
- Critical illness dysfunction
- Frailty, polypharmacy, chronic illness
- Achalasia, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)/hiatal hernia
- Gastroparesis, vomiting
- Mechanical ventilation, recent extubation following prolonged intubation
- Ill-fitting dentures

Some preventive measures:

- Swallow studies; speech therapy
- Postural modifications:
 - Avoid slumping forward or extending the head
 - If eating in bed, elevate head of bed at 30 to 45 degrees
- Enhance texture of food to induce mastication, especially in dementia patients
- Thicken liquids
- Remove distractions at mealtime
- Provide meals at times with greater level of function when patient more alert
- Maintain airway clearance – suction secretions if appropriate
- Control sialorrhea (excessive drooling) as appropriate, as well as dry mouth
- Avoid medication tablets in patients with dysphagia. Use liquids, crushed, or orally disintegrating tablets.

<https://provider.simplyhealthcareplans.com>

- Practice oral hygiene and ensure dentures fit properly
- Medication review – avoid medications that increase reflux or impair swallowing
- For enteral feedings:
 - Elevate head of bed at 30 to 45 degrees
 - Routinely verify appropriate placement of feeding tube
 - Monitor residuals

References:

- BMC Geriatrics Interventions to Prevent Aspiration in Older Adults With Dysphagia Living in Nursing Homes: A Scoping Review (accessed March 2024): bmcgeriatr.biomedcentral.com
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Guidelines for Preventing Health-Care-Associated Pneumonia, 2003. Recommendations of CDC and the Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee (accessed April 2024): [Cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5303a1.htm](https://cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5303a1.htm)