MS and Trouble Swallowing

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Swallowing Difficulties with MS

You know MS limits and restricts your level of functioning. From energy and mobility to concentration and mental confusion, MS impacts almost every area of your life depending on the area of damaged nerves.

MS and trouble swallowing are common companions; many people with MS experience some type of swallowing problems. Symptoms of swallowing problems include coughing, chocking, and feeling that food is stuck in the throat. This occurs when MS weakens the muscles used to swallow or when there is miscommunication between the brain and muscles.

MS speech problems can develop as a result of swallowing troubles. The weakened muscles can result in slurred speech, poor signalling from the brain to the mouth can interrupt the normal rate or pattern of speech.

Management

Whether your symptoms come and go or are here to stay, taking action to improve your quality of life is paramount. Follow these tips to better understand and manage your speech and swallowing issues. Here's how:

- **Acknowledge the issues –** Admitting to yourself that MS is taking another part of you is a difficult and painful experience. This triggers the grief and loss process all over again and you are likely tired of grieving. In this case, denial is dangerous. People with swallowing difficulties that do not receive appropriate treatment are at higher risk of dehydration and pneumonia. Pneumonia is common as food and drink misses the esophagus, goes down the trachea and into the lungs. Ignoring these signs can turn a big problem into a huge problem.

- **Consult a speech-language pathologist (SLP) –** This professional typically has a master's degree and is competent in many speech and swallowing techniques and interventions. Depending on your restrictions, an SLP will recommend exercises to improve your swallowing or speech. If swallowing has been an ongoing issue, your SLP may complete a modified barium swallow (MBS) test. During an MBS, you eat foods of various consistencies that are observable by X-Ray. The SLP can understand what thicknesses are appropriate for you.
- **Consider psychotherapy –** An SLP can help with the physical aspects of speech and swallowing while a psychotherapist can assist with the psychological. A therapist will take you through the process of transition and work to eliminate denial. If acceptance has been elusive, a therapist can aid in the process.

At-Home Interventions

Have you looked into interventions to facilitate better swallowing? Many simple, noninvasive techniques are available to assist in more effective swallowing including:

- **Assume the position –** Trying to eat while lying down or reclined is too problematic with weakened muscles. This leads to great risks of pneumonia and choking. Sit up straight with your eyes looking forward.
- **Change your diet –** It is likely that liquids that are too thin cause you to choke and foods too hard or chewy tire your muscles. Find foods that make sense for you and try substituting foods that are no longer manageable. Expose yourself to different textures, temperatures and types of food. Some will be easier to swallow than others.
- **Focus –** People without swallowing issues take the action for granted and can multitask when eating. For you, concentrate on the behavior by reducing distractions, taking small bites and alternating food and drink.
- **Stay hydrated –** Dehydration is a real risk. Eating ice chips, lemon water or ice pops will increase fluids in your system, promote saliva and improve swallowing frequency.

Conclusion

Rather than focusing on the losses of MS, focus on the techniques and interventions to improve your functioning. Work hard and follow recommendations. You may not be able to prevent the problem but quick action will limit the damage.