

ABUHB Paediatric Psychology

Swallowing difficulties

Information for parents and carers

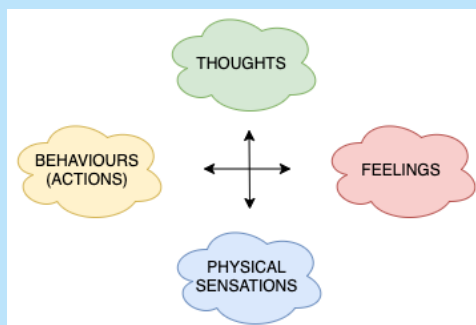
This resource is for parents and carers of children who have a fear of swallowing. **It is only appropriate when professionals have ruled out any physical reasons for swallowing difficulties.**

Reasons your child may be fearful of swallowing or have difficulty eating certain foods:

- A dislike or discomfort of the sensations of swallowing
- A fear of food getting stuck, or choking
- Worries that if they choke no one will be able to help them
- Following a scary experience of choking or witnessing someone choking

Understanding our minds

It can be helpful for you and your child to understand the following cycle:



When something scary happens to you us, it affects our thoughts, feelings and behaviours around food.



Our minds are like problem solving machines! Our minds may tell us stories about what might happen if we eat certain foods. This is our mind's way of trying to keep us safe, however sometimes these stories can be unhelpful. We want help our minds learn a more helpful way of thinking about swallowing.

We can help by:

1. Learning more about swallowing and how it works
2. Understand how our actions might be getting in the way
3. The role of hypervigilance
4. Breaking the cycle: creating a hierarchy and experimenting
5. Unhooking from unhelpful thoughts

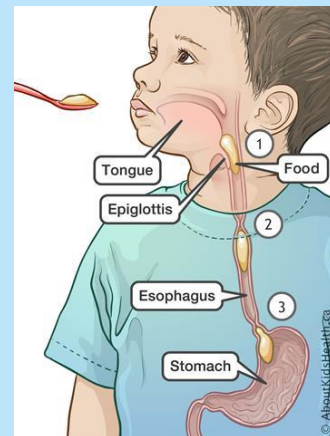
How does swallowing work?

Watch a video here!



Can you spot the stages of swallowing?

Even before we start to eat, when you smell a tasty food, see it, or think about it, saliva (or spit) begins to form in your mouth.



When you eat, the **saliva** starts to break down the chemicals in the food. This helps make the food mushy and easy to swallow. Your **tongue** pushes the food around while you chew with your teeth. When you're ready to swallow, the tongue pushes a tiny bit of mushed-up food called a **bolus** toward the back of your throat and into the opening of your **oesophagus**.

The **oesophagus** is like a stretchy pipe. It moves food from the back of your throat to your stomach. At the back of your throat is also your **windpipe**, which allows air to come in and out of your body. When you swallow food or liquids, a special flap called the **epiglottis** flops down over the opening of your windpipe to make sure the food enters the oesophagus and not the windpipe. This stops food from going down the wrong way and into the lungs.

Once food has entered the oesophagus **muscles** in the walls of the oesophagus move in a wavy way to slowly squeeze the food through the oesophagus. This is called '**peristalsis**' and takes about 2 or 3 seconds.

Our body knows when it is time to swallow! It does this automatically.

See this in action! Try sucking on a mint or sweet, and notice your urge to swallow. What happens if you try not to swallow when that urge shows up? It probably feels pretty difficult!

When we bring lots of attention to chewing and swallowing, and try and change it, it gets in the way of our body doing its job automatically.

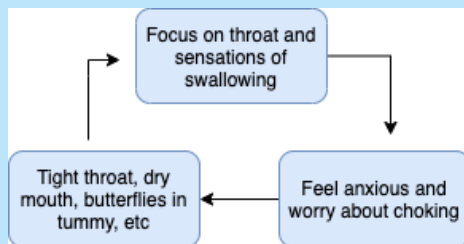
The role of hypervigilance

Children have often been frightened by an experience of choking or are very scared of this happening, and so they pay more attention to their eating, chewing and swallowing. They also might take actions such as:

- Avoiding certain foods
- Mashing food before eating it
- Over-chewing food
- Drinking lots of liquid with food
- Hypervigilance towards sensations of swallowing

These behaviours feel helpful in the short term, and are understandable given how scary eating and swallowing feels, but in the long term they are keeping your child stuck in an unhelpful cycle.

Hypervigilance also increases our **anxiety**. When we get anxious, our body experiences physical sensations, for example our blood vessels constrict which can make it feel like our throat is tight, and our mouth goes dry.



These sensations can be uncomfortable **but are not dangerous**. They are part of the fight/flight/freeze response and are there to try and keep us safe when our mind believes something is a threat.

Scan here to learn more about anxiety and the fight, flight, freeze response



What can we do?

- Create a food hierarchy
- Learn skills to refocus attention
- Experiment with dropping our unhelpful behaviours with 'safe foods' and then experiment with more feared foods

One way to refocus attention is to tune into our senses:



Hierarchy and Experimenting

An important step in managing anxiety involves **facing feared situations**, such as eating. It is normal for everyone to want to avoid the things they fear. However, avoidance prevents your child from learning that the things they fear are not as dangerous as they think.

It is important to help your child think about why they want to change their eating. What are they missing out on that is important to them? This helps them be **willing** to face difficult situations because they are **meaningful**.



Create a hierarchy together of foods that your child wants to work towards eating. Think of this like a ladder. Starting with the easiest step and then towards more challenging or scary foods.

It is now time to start experimenting! Start with practicing eating easier foods without the unhelpful behaviours and then start moving up the ladder to more difficult foods. Remember it is ok to take small steps!

Your child's mind might come up with unhelpful stories. Help them to notice and step back from these thoughts by trying saying "**I notice I'm having the thought that...**" or "**thank you mind!**" And then practicing the refocusing skills.

Top Tips!

- Be honest.
- Relax mealtime rules. For example, you can try having TV or iPad time in the short term to help your child refocus their attention away from sensation of swallowing. Then you can work towards eating without these.
- Allow for choice in experiments. Often providing two choices can be helpful, these can be from the hierarchy you created together.
- Try not to 'overprepare' for experiments
- Do experiments together and try to make these fun!
- Pick a good time for experiments. For example, when you have lots of time available. If there is time pressure to eat, or if your child is overly tired or overwhelmed this is not going to set you up for success.
- If your child cannot do the experiment, stay calm, still eat the food yourself, and break down the steps further.
- Practice, practice, practice! It is normal for this to take time.

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