

Waiting Well:

Supporting people with swallowing difficulties while they wait for an SLT assessment



GIG
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University Health Board

General guidance for care home staff and carers

This guidance is designed to help care homes and carers support people with swallowing difficulties safely while they are waiting for a formal Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) assessment.

It is not a substitute for clinical assessment or individualised advice.

If you are ever concerned, please escalate (see Section 2).

1. SUPPORT WHILE YOU WAIT



GENERAL EATING AND DRINKING STRATEGIES

- Cut food into smaller pieces.
- Encourage small mouthfuls and a slow pace.
- Ensure one mouthful is swallowed before the next.
- Encourage sitting upright for all meals and for at least 30 minutes after.
- Provide a calm, unhurried environment with minimal distractions.



MONITORING AND RECORDING CONCERNS

- Monitor and record any changes in swallowing, including: coughing, choking, wet/gurgly voice, increased time to eat/drink, chest infections.
- Monitor any weight loss/BMI/malnutritional risk via the MUST screening protocol
- If you notice difficulty taking medication (e.g. coughing, pocketing, difficulty swallowing tablets/capsules), contact the GP or pharmacist for advice.



AVOID KNOWN CHOKING HAZARDS

- Be aware of high-risk foods such as nuts, popcorn, whole grapes, hard sweets, and tough or fibrous meats.
- Adapt food preparation to reduce risk (e.g. cut into small pieces, soften, remove bones/skins/shells/crusts).
- Never leave a person alone while eating or drinking if they are at risk.



LIQUID CONSISTENCY (THICKENERS)

- Do not start thickened fluids or any liquid modification without a formal SLT assessment.
- Please continue to offer drinks as usual unless otherwise advised by a healthcare professional.



RECORD KEEPING AND COMMUNICATION

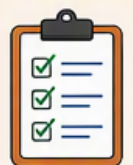
- Record any observations and concerns clearly
- Share this information with the GP, pharmacist or relevant healthcare professionals as needed.



ORAL CARE

- Brush teeth/gums/tongue twice a day
- Where NBM/taking very little orally, 2 hourly oral care is often needed
- Consider any additional needs e.g. chlorhexidine gel, water based gel
- Ensure dentures are kept clean
- Follow local oral care guidance

3. MANAGING RISK DURING LONG WAITS FOR ASSESSMENT



- Whilst awaiting a formal SLT assessment, the duty of care remains with the care provider to balance patient safety with least restrictive care.
- Monitor regularly and review eating/drinking support as needed.
- Evaluate the range and texture of foods provided to ensure they are appropriate for the person.
- Consider the person's overall health, preferences and quality of life.
- Where there are high risks or clear signs of health consequences, consider escalation for urgent medical review via the GP or A&E.



IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This guidance is general in nature and does not replace individual assessment, diagnosis or treatment. It does not create an open duty of care from the Speech and Language Therapy service. Seek professional medical advice if you are concerned about someone's swallowing or breathing.

2. ESCALATION: WHEN TO SEEK URGENT HELP



ESCALATE IMMEDIATELY

If a person cannot breathe, cough, or speak, initiate the appropriate emergency response (e.g. back blows, abdominal thrusts, or use of an approved airway clearance device), following local guidance and the person's care plan.



CALL 999 IMMEDIATELY IF:



- The person is choking and cannot breathe, speak, or cough effectively.



- There are signs of breathing difficulty or respiratory distress (e.g. rapid breathing, blue lips).



- There is significant bleeding from the mouth.



- The person becomes unresponsive.

SAME DAY ESCALATION (GP / NHS 111 / A&E)

Seek urgent medical review if:



- There is a suspected chest infection (e.g. fever, productive cough, deterioration in breathing).



- There is significant weight loss, dehydration



- There is a sudden change in swallowing ability or communication.



- Repeated choking episodes occur.

Contact:



GP



NHS 111 Wales
Call 111 or visit
111.wales.nhs.uk



Attend A&E
if clinically
indicated



When in doubt, escalate concerns.

Your observations and timely action can help keep the person safe.



In an emergency, call 999



NHS 111 Wales: Call 111
or visit 111.wales.nhs.uk



SLT services – non-urgent enquiries:
Contact your GP practice or
local community team.