



Swallowing and Aspiration Risk in Parkinson's

A Training Guide for Assisted Living and Long-Term Care Staff

Swallowing changes are common in individuals living with Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's affects the muscles and coordination involved in swallowing, which can increase the risk of **food, liquid, or saliva entering the airway instead of the stomach**. This is known as **aspiration**.

Aspiration can lead to serious complications, including **aspiration pneumonia**, which is a common cause of hospitalization in individuals with Parkinson's.

Early recognition of swallowing changes and proper support during meals can significantly improve safety.

Why Swallowing Changes Occur

Parkinson's disease affects the brain's ability to coordinate muscle movement. The same changes that cause slowed movement in the arms and legs can also affect the **muscles of the mouth, throat, and esophagus**.

These changes may lead to:

- Slower chewing
- Difficulty forming a food bolus
- Delayed swallow reflex
- Reduced throat muscle coordination
- Food or liquid entering the airway

Swallowing problems may develop gradually and may not always be obvious at first.

Warning Signs of Swallowing Difficulty

Staff should watch for the following signs during meals or medication administration:

- Coughing or choking during meals
- Throat clearing while eating or drinking
- Wet, gurgling, or “bubbly” voice after swallowing
- Food remaining in the mouth after swallowing
- Drooling or difficulty managing saliva
- Taking a long time to finish meals
- Recurrent chest infections or pneumonia
- Unexplained weight loss or dehydration

These signs may indicate a swallowing disorder known as **dysphagia**.

Silent Aspiration

Some individuals with Parkinson’s may experience **silent aspiration**, meaning food or liquid enters the airway without obvious coughing or choking.

Because this may occur without visible symptoms, staff should remain alert for:

- Frequent respiratory infections
 - Unexplained fevers
 - Increased fatigue during meals
 - Changes in breathing after eating
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Safe Mealtime Practices

Simple strategies can help reduce aspiration risk.

Encourage upright positioning

Residents should sit upright during meals and remain upright for at least **30 minutes after eating**.

Allow extra time for meals

Parkinson’s slows movement, including chewing and swallowing.

Encourage small bites and sips

Large bites increase choking risk.

Minimize distractions

A calm eating environment helps residents focus on swallowing.

Observe closely during meals

Watch for coughing, throat clearing, or difficulty swallowing.

Medication and Swallowing

Swallowing ability may worsen during “**OFF periods,**” when Parkinson’s medications wear off.

If a resident has difficulty swallowing medications:

- Notify nursing staff
- Do not crush medications unless ordered
- Monitor for choking or coughing

Medication timing can significantly affect swallowing safety.

When to Notify Nursing Staff or a Provider

Staff should report concerns if a resident experiences:

- Repeated coughing or choking during meals
- Difficulty swallowing medications
- Wet or gurgling voice after swallowing
- Frequent throat clearing while eating
- Sudden decline in eating ability
- Unexplained weight loss
- Signs of respiratory infection

Early evaluation can help prevent complications.

The Role of Speech-Language Pathologists

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) specialize in evaluating and treating swallowing disorders.

An SLP may:

- Conduct a swallowing evaluation
- Recommend safer food and liquid textures

- Provide swallowing exercises
- Teach safe swallowing strategies

Following recommended diet modifications and swallowing strategies is essential for safety.

Supporting Residents Living With Parkinson's

With proper awareness and support, many individuals with Parkinson's can continue to eat safely and maintain good nutrition.

Facility staff play an important role in:

- Recognizing swallowing changes early
 - Supporting safe eating practices
 - Monitoring medication timing
 - Communicating concerns promptly
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Wisconsin Parkinson Association

The **Wisconsin Parkinson Association (WPA)** provides education, resources, and training materials for healthcare professionals and care facilities supporting individuals living with Parkinson's.

To learn more about Parkinson's care resources and education, visit:

wiparkinson.org

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