Dysphagia

What is dysphagia?
Dysphagia is a term that describes difficulty swallowing both solid and liquid foods. The condition results from various medical conditions that cause weakness and structural problems in the coordination of the mouth and throat muscles that direct food and/or liquids to travel down the trachea (“windpipe”) instead of the esophagus (“food pipe”). When food enters the windpipe instead of the food pipe, it can lead to a potentially dangerous condition called aspiration, which may lead to pneumonia if not treated.

What are the symptoms?
Dysphagia may seem to be more severe at some times than others, or the condition may progress over time.

Symptoms include:
- Difficulty getting food or liquids to go down the food pipe on the first attempt.
- Coughing/choking during or after meals.
- Unintentional weight loss.
- Throat clearing.
- Wet gurgling voice after eating.
- Fever.
- Chills.
- Changes in breathing.
- Food or liquids traveling back up through your throat or nose after swallowing.
- Feeling of food or liquids being “stuck” in throat or chest.
- Pain while swallowing.
- Feeling of heartburn.
- Dehydration.
- Excessive secretions.
- Leakage of food or saliva from mouth or tracheostomy.

What causes dysphagia?
Dysphagia may be caused by a number of conditions. It typically occurs in older adults but may also occur in children. Sometimes the muscles and nerves that move food through your mouth, throat and esophagus are not working as they should.

Common causes include:
- Trauma to the head, neck or spine.
- Brain injury.
- Stroke.
- Radiation treatments for cancers.
- Diseases that affect muscle function such as Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).
- Childhood syndromes such as Down syndrome and cerebral palsy.
- Certain immune system disorders such as Sjogren’s syndrome and rheumatoid arthritis.
- Spasms in the esophagus.
- Narrowing of the esophagus.
- Blockage of the esophagus.
- Reflux (GERD or LPR), which may cause ulcers in the esophagus.

When to see a specialist
Dysphagia specialists include otolaryngologists and speech language pathologists.

- If a person has problems breathing because something is stuck in their throat, call 911 immediately.
- If you have had difficulty swallowing and are experiencing any of the symptoms listed for more than one week, you should see a medical specialist for evaluation of the swallowing difficulty.
• Diverticula, which are small pockets in the esophageal wall.
• Tumors or masses on or near the esophagus.

How is dysphagia evaluated?
Dysphagia is evaluated by a multidisciplinary team that involves an otolaryngologist, speech pathologist, nutritionist, radiologist, gastroenterologist and primary care physician with specialization in swallowing disorders. First, a member of the dysphagia team will ask questions about your medical history and current swallowing problems. Next, imaging tests of the head and neck will be taken to help find the cause of the problem. These tests may include:

• A modified barium swallow study (MBS): This study is conducted by a speech pathologist and a radiologist to determine the nature of the swallowing difficulty. During MBS, barium representing different food consistencies is presented and motion imaging is recorded as these different consistencies are swallowed. The barium allows the person conducting the study to determine the nature of the swallowing difficulty and potential causes of aspiration.
• Flexible endoscopic evaluation of swallowing (FEES): In this procedure a small endoscope attached to a digital camera is placed through one nostril to visualize the throat as food and liquids are presented so that the doctors may assess where the swallowing difficulties are occurring. This study is conducted by a speech pathologist and an otolaryngologist.

After the above tests are completed, the speech pathologist will review the exam findings and determine the safest consistencies that the individual can eat. The speech pathologist will also discuss any compensatory maneuvers that can facilitate safe swallowing and assist with exercises that can facilitate safe swallowing.

Other tests that an individual may undergo if indicated are:
• Transnasal esophagoscopy (TNE): During this test, an endoscope is placed from the nose into the esophagus to determine any structural problems with the esophagus. This study is typically conducted by an otolaryngologist or gastroenterologist.
• Manometry: During this test, a small tube is placed down your esophagus. The tube is attached to a computer that measures the pressure in your esophagus as you swallow. This test is performed by a gastroenterologist.
• pH monitoring: This test helps determine how often acid from the stomach gets into the esophagus and how long it stays there.

What is the treatment for dysphagia?
Treatment varies depending on the exact cause of your dysphagia. Some treatments include:

• Exercises for swallowing muscles. This will help strengthen and balance the muscles needed for swallowing.
• Use of compensatory strategies such as tucking chin down or turning head to one side for swallowing.
• Changing the foods you eat. Certain foods and liquids make swallowing easier.
• Dilatation of the esophagus.
• Botox injection to the esophagus to relax this muscle if it is tight and is blocking the food from entering into the esophagus.
• Surgery if indicated.
• Reflux medication if indicated.

The UK Clinical Voice Center
The UK Clinical Voice Center began in 2008 as a result of years of research in vocal disorders. Until the center was opened by the UK College of Health Sciences, patients with voice problems or concerns had to travel out of state to seek care. Now a multidisciplinary team of dedicated clinicians, researchers, physicians, professors and specialists can treat even the most complex voice disorders in a location that is close to home for many Kentuckians. Eventually, the center plans to utilize telemedicine to extend the reach of the center across the state.

The UK Clinical Voice Center is located in the Kentucky Clinic, Third Floor, Wing B, Room B317.
To make an appointment, call 859-257-0143.

More Information
To find out more about the UK Clinical Voice Center, call toll free 1-800-333-8874 or visit us online at ukhealthcare.uky.edu/ent/voice.