

# CHOKING ON FOOD AND HAVING DIFFICULTY SWALLOWING

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Patients frequently present to my office with a complaint of food getting stuck in their throat and choking, and even having difficulty eating common foods that only a few months or a few years ago they had no problem with. There are some reasons for seeing this type of problem occurring later in life, and we are going to discuss this.

First of all, let's talk about anatomy. Swallowing is very complex and involves the oral cavity (mouth), which starts at the edge of the lips and ends behind the wisdom teeth. Next is the throat, which has two functions: allowing us to breathe air, and to eat and drink. The throat, lower down the neck, splits into the airway going to the lungs and the esophagus going to the stomach. Because of this complex function, problems can arise. There are two distinct and important jobs that occur while we eat. One is that the food is transported into the stomach and the other is that the airway is protected so that we do not choke. As one ages, choking and swallowing problems are more likely to occur.

Mouth and throat muscle problems, including abnormal tongue function, can stop the food from going down properly and even cause it to pool in the throat, thus putting one at risk for choking. It has also been shown that the mouth/oral cavity, as we age, has diminished ability to sense when the food is coming, how large an amount it is, and how to transport it properly into the stomach. Typically, we see this more frequently in patients over 60 years of age. As we age, like the muscles in our arms and legs, the muscles of our throat don't work as well. Some of us are required to wear glasses because our vision is not as good. There are some individuals that wear hearing aids to help them hear. Swallowing problems are fairly common in patients over 60 years of age.

Some of the things that patients can do for themselves are to manage their behavior while eating: sit up straight and have good posture, take small bites, eat slowly, chew more frequently, and use sips of water in between to clear the throat.

If these measures do not work, you should seek the advice of your physician. There may be some underlying medical problem, such as a stroke, that is causing problems swallowing. As an ear, nose and throat doctor, I have instruments that can look at the throat and make a determination as to what exactly is going on.

Remember, the throat serves two purposes: allowing food and drink to pass unencumbered into the stomach and protecting the airway while we eat so we don't choke.

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