Special Needs Fact Sheets

SWALLOWING FACT SHEET FOR CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM PROFESSIONALS

INTRODUCTION

Child Nutrition Professionals occasionally encounter children with a swallowing disorder or difficulty swallowing certain foods or liquids. This Fact Sheet provides basic information and factors to consider when working with children with swallowing problems.

Federal law requires that programs receiving Federal money such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the National School Lunch Program, and School Breakfast Program provide services for individuals with a handicap or disability. Federal law further defines a disability as an impairment which substantially limits major life activities. The ability to swallow is a major life activity; therefore, problems with swallowing are generally considered a disability.

For children with swallowing disorders, the provision of appropriate foods and liquids and close supervision while eating are critical to their health and safety. Accommodations for children with swallowing problems can usually be made at little cost. However, the accommodations may require some special equipment and training of staff as well as the assistance of the school nurse or the speech-language pathologist when feeding the child.

Specific recommendations for each child with a swallowing disorder should be provided in writing for the child nutrition staff. Recommendations or diet prescriptions should only be changed by the physician or appropriate health professional.

WHAT IS A SWALLOWING DISORDER?

A swallowing disorder is a broad term that includes problems at any phase of the eating process – from when the food enters the mouth until it enters the stomach. Another term commonly used for swallowing disorders is “dysphagia” (pronounced “dis FAY juh”). A child may have a temporary or long-term swallowing disorder. For example, a child who has been involved in an accident or who has had oral surgery may have a temporary swallowing disorder. A child may have a long-term swallowing disorder due to medical conditions such as cerebral palsy, gastrointestinal problems, and cleft lip or palate. A licensed physician or other healthcare professional may diagnose a child with a swallowing disorder. The physician’s diagnosis is usually based on an evaluation of the child’s eating ability by a speech-language pathologist or other health care specialist. A videofluoroscopic swallow study (VFSS) or modified barium swallow is commonly used to analyze the swallow mechanism.
WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF A SWALLOWING DISORDER?

Symptoms of swallowing problems may include gurgling sounds, coughing or gagging, excessive spitting up or drooling, or failure to gain weight. Children may also react to discomfort caused by swallowing problems by arching or stiffening their body or by simply refusing to eat.

HOW IS A SWALLOWING DISORDER MANAGED?

Accurate diagnosis and careful evaluation and observation of swallowing problems are essential in the management of swallowing and feeding disorders. Specialists such as a speech-language pathologist can recommend the types of foods and liquids as well as feeding techniques and positions best suited for the individual child. The National Dysphagia Diet (NDD) was developed to promote the consistent use of terminology in diet prescriptions. (However, not all health practitioners use the NDD's.) The terms used to describe consistencies of food and liquids can be confusing. Seek guidance from a speech-language pathologist or a registered dietitian for help in understanding the terminology on a diet prescription.

The recommendations and follow-up care and evaluation by the speech-language pathologist can be invaluable in maintaining good nutrition and in preventing food or liquids from entering the airway and lungs. Recommendations may include changing the normal texture of food by chopping, grinding, or pureeing. Based on the specific problems of each child, liquids may also need to be thickened. The degree to which the liquid is thickened may also be a part of the recommendations. The terms used to describe the degree of thickness are usually honey, nectar, and pudding. Liquids may be purchased already thickened to one of these stages of thickness. The child nutrition staff will need training if they are to prepare liquids to a specific consistency.

Recommendations may also include how the child sits when eating or being fed. Children are usually seated in an upright position to help prevent choking or getting food or liquids into the lungs (aspiration). Generally, a speech-language pathologist, physical therapist, or occupational therapist is consulted regarding positioning. Utensils such as rubber-coated spoons and special cups may also be recommended. All recommendations for modifying the texture of foods, thickening liquids, positioning of the child, and the use of special equipment should be carefully followed by all staff at the school or day care.
COMMONLY USED ABBREVIATIONS

ASHA -- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
CP -- Cerebral Palsy
DD -- Developmental Disability
DH -- Developmentally Handicapped
IDEA -- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP -- Individualized Education Program
ISP -- Individual Service Plans
LRE -- Least Restrictive Environment
MPA -- Minimum Physical Assistance
NDD -- National Dysphagia Diet
NICHCY -- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
OT -- Occupational Therapy or Occupational Therapist
PA -- Physical Assistance
PT -- Physical Therapy or Physical Therapist
RD -- Registered Dietitian
RN -- Registered Nurse
SA -- State Agency
SDE -- State Department of Education
SLP -- Speech Language Pathologist

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Parent
- ADA Coordinator at your school
- Special Needs Team at your school
- Local Health Department or Hospital
- Registered Dietitian
- Speech Language Pathologist
- State Agency
- National Food Service Management Institute Help Desk


American Dietetic Association, 120 South Riverside Plaza, Suite 2000, Chicago, Illinois 60606-6995; 800-877-1600; www.eatright.org

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 10801 Rockville Pike, Rockville, MD 20852; 800-638-8255; www.asha.org

Kansas State University and Kansas State Board of Education Nutrition Services. (n.d.). Special foods for special kids. [University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute].
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WEB SITES

American Dietetic Association (ADA)  
http://www.eatright.org  
Has a variety of tools and information for the dietetic professional and information on how to contact a dietitian.

American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (ASPEN)  
http://clinnutr.org/  
A professional organization whose members are involved in the provision of clinical nutrition therapies, including parenteral and enteral nutrition.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)  
http://www.asha.org/  
Information about communication disorders for parents, family media and others as well as information for speech and hearing professionals.

Dysphagia Research Society (DRS)  
http://www.dysphagiaresearch.org  
Research group responsible for publishing the *Dysphagia Journal* which is an international source of information for physicians and other health professionals interested in dysphagia.

Dysphagia Resource Center  
http://www.dysphagia.com/  
Resources for swallowing and swallowing disorders.

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