

Feeding and Swallowing Difficulties in Infants and Children

Speech-language pathologists have an essential role on your child's care team.



Feeding and swallowing difficulties may occur in infants and children at any age. Children may experience difficulties in feeding (problems such as sucking, chewing, drinking from a cup) or swallowing (problems moving food or liquid from the mouth to the stomach). They can occur in typically developing children without a known cause or can be related to an underlying medical or developmental condition. Some feeding and swallowing problems are temporary while others may be lifelong.

Potential Causes of Feeding and Swallowing Difficulties

- **Problems affecting the respiratory system** (e.g., laryngomalacia, vocal cord pathologies, chronic lung disease, tracheostomy, etc.)
- **Problems affecting the digestive system** (e.g., gastroesophageal reflux, allergies, intolerances etc.)
- **Structural issues** (e.g., cleft lip, cleft palate, enlarged tonsils)
- **Heart disease**
- **Neurological disorders** (e.g., traumatic brain injury, stroke, brain tumor, cerebral palsy, meningitis, muscular dystrophy, etc.)
- **Prematurity**
- **Developmental delays, behavioural problems, and sensory issues**

Signs and Symptoms of Feeding and Swallowing Difficulties

May vary based on the child's age/development.

- Difficulty sucking
- Difficulty coordinating sucking, swallowing, and breathing
- Coughing, choking, and/or gagging
- Changes in breathing rate during swallowing
- Noisy breathing during or after feeding
- Wet or hoarse voice during or after feeding
- History of chest infections (e.g., pneumonia)
- Difficulty controlling liquids or chewing solid foods
- Loss of fluid or food from the nose while eating
- Excessive drooling
- Frequent spitting up and/or vomiting
- Weight loss or slow weight gain
- Needing extra time to eat in comparison to their peers
- Refusing to eat or drink or selective eating

What problems can result from feeding and swallowing difficulties?

Feeding and swallowing difficulties can increase the risk of aspiration (i.e., liquid/food going down the wrong way toward the lungs) and aspiration pneumonia (i.e., chest infection related to aspiration). They can also negatively impact nutrition, hydration, weight gain, and typical development, as well as contribute to social and emotional challenges, including increased parental/guardian stress. In some cases, infants and children may refuse or develop aversions to liquids or foods even when they are able to safely eat or drink by mouth. An individualized, interprofessional treatment plan is important to minimize negative outcomes and foster positive feeding and swallowing experiences.



How do speech-language pathologists help?

Speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) have specific training and expertise to provide essential assessment and evidence-based intervention for feeding and swallowing difficulties. S-LPs work as part of an interprofessional team to support holistic, person-centered care.

S-LP Assessment

What to expect

To help identify the problem and make individualized recommendations, the S-LP will:

- Review relevant history (including family, social, medical, developmental, and feeding history)
- Complete a physical examination (e.g., look at your child's mouth, tongue, posture, muscle tone, etc.)
- Observe your infant or child during a feed or a meal/snack

The S-LP may recommend a more in-depth assessment that can look at potential anatomical or physiological contributing factors to feeding and swallowing difficulties. These assessments may be done jointly with another healthcare professional.

Examples of instrumental assessments carried out by S-LPs include:

- **Videofluoroscopic swallowing study (VFSS):** a type of x-ray that takes a series of images (like a video) of what is happening in the infant or child's mouth, airway, throat and upper esophagus while drinking and eating. Barium is added to the liquid or food to show up on the x-ray.
- **Flexible Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES):** a small flexible tube with a camera on the end is passed through the nose and down the back of the throat to see what is happening when your child is swallowing.

S-LP Recommendations and Intervention

What to expect

The S-LP collaborates with the interprofessional team to develop an individualized care plan. The goal is to ensure that eating and drinking is a safe and enjoyable experience for you and your child.

Recommendations and interventions may include:

- Requesting additional information about your infant or child's ability to eat or drink through further assessment by other health care professionals or by the S-LP (e.g., VFSS or FEES)
- Use of adapted feeding aids (e.g., bottles, nipples, cups, utensils, cushions, seats, etc.)
- Considering other methods of getting nutrition (e.g., tube feeding) through consultation with the team
- Adjusting feeding schedules
- Changes to feeding position to make drinking or eating safer and easier
- Changing the texture of food or liquid to help make eating or drinking easier and safer
- Feeding therapy to work on the motor skills needed for eating and drinking
- Educating, coaching, and counselling parents and caregivers on your child's development

Your child's care team may have further recommendations including medications or surgery to address some medical causes of feeding and swallowing difficulties.

Feeding and swallowing difficulties can be complex and are best managed in a team approach. Speech-language pathologists are key members of this team.

To find an S-LP near you, visit speechandhearing.ca.