

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH DIVISION OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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HEALTH BULLETIN: SIGNS OF ASPIRATION & ASPIRATION PNEUMONIA

Aspiration is a common problem among people we support who have difficulty swallowing or “dysphagia”. **Aspiration** is a word that means food or fluids that should go into the stomach go into the lungs instead. When such material goes into the lungs it can cause **Aspiration Pneumonia**. **Aspiration Pneumonia** can worsen quickly if not properly identified and treated. **Aspiration Pneumonia** can result in death.

Please become familiar with the signs and symptoms of **aspiration** and **aspiration pneumonia**. Alert medical professionals and supervisors when aspiration or symptoms of aspiration pneumonia are suspected.

Signs of Aspiration

Common signs of dysphasia and/or **aspiration** are:

- Coughing before or after swallowing (this is to clear the food or fluid out of their lungs. Sometimes, however, the person does not cough at all. This is what is known as a “silent aspiration.”)
- Much drooling, especially during meals
- Pocketing food inside the cheek
- Choking on certain foods, for example white bread
- Nose running or sneezing during dining
- Trouble chewing
- Trouble swallowing certain types of fluids
- Trouble swallowing certain types of food
- Taking a very long time to finish a meal
- Getting tired during the meal
- Refusal to eat certain foods or finish a meal
- A complaint of feeling like something is caught in the throat
- A gurgly voice during or after eating or drinking
- Much throat clearing after a meal
- Repeated episodes of choking, frequent colds, pneumonias or “allergies”
- Unexplained weight loss
- Unexplained fevers that come and go
- Coughing when lying flat or sitting up quickly from a reclined position

Symptoms of Aspiration Pneumonia

Sometimes, it may take some time for symptoms of **aspiration pneumonia** to show up. The signs and symptoms of aspiration pneumonia can quickly get worse, if it is not properly diagnosed and treated.

Aspiration pneumonia can be life-threatening and should be considered an emergency.

Common signs and symptoms of **aspiration pneumonia**:

- Cough is very frequent and may expel foul-smelling mucus or phlegm from the lungs. This phlegm may contain pus or streaks of blood. The sputum may be greenish in color and they may cough up frothy (bubbly) fluid from the lungs.
- Shortness of breath. Breathing is usually noisy. Their heartbeat or breathing while resting may seem faster than normal.
- Fever or chills accompanied with sweat.
- Pain in the chest, while coughing or when taking a deep breath.
- Swallowing trouble, may feel as if something is stuck in their throat.
- May be in a state of confusion, feels dizzy, faint, or is unusually upset or anxious.
- Feeling of suffocation, their skin and fingernails may attain a bluish tinge due to lack of oxygen.
- Fatigue, wheezing and breath odor may also occur.

Keep a close watch on any symptom of aspiration pneumonia and alert supervisors and medical professionals. Proper diagnosis ensures timely intervention by the doctor so that prompt treatment is initiated. Although, symptoms of aspiration pneumonia take several days to appear, do not neglect them. **If an individual has difficulty breathing and/or looks very ill, call 911.**