

Eating, Swallowing and Saliva

Some people with Parkinson's may experience increased saliva production that is thicker and stickier, while others may have the opposite experience, with a particularly dry mouth.

Eating and swallowing

The medical term for swallowing difficulties is dysphagia. Some of the signs of dysphagia include:

- Coughing when eating or drinking
- Difficulty swallowing certain foods, fluids or medications
- Meals taking longer to finish than usual
- Unexplained weight loss or loss of appetite
- Repeated chest infections
- Beverages needed to wash down food
- Choking on foods, liquids or saliva
- Drooling

A person with dysphagia is at risk of weight loss, malnutrition and dehydration. Taking medication can become difficult. Food and drink can 'go down the wrong way' which can lead to chest infections and in some cases, pneumonia.

Dysphagia can also impact a person's quality of life, leading to feelings of embarrassment and anxiety around eating. This emotional toll can further complicate the already challenging

condition, making it crucial to address with a healthcare professional to manage symptoms effectively and enhance overall wellbeing.

Tips to overcome swallowing problems

- Sit up straight when eating and drinking.
- Take small mouthfuls and regular sips of fluid during the meal.
- Reduce distractions and avoid talking while chewing and swallowing.
- Be alert to fever and coughs and seek help immediately when they occur.
- Eat and drink during your medication 'on' period.

Excess saliva

Saliva is necessary for digestion as it lubricates the throat to make swallowing easier and contains chemicals that break down food. Saliva also assists with oral hygiene as it helps break down plaque.

Some people with Parkinson's develop problems controlling their saliva, which can lead to drooling or dribbling. The medical term for this is sialorrhea.

Research shows sialorrhea affects more than half of people with Parkinson's. When living with Parkinson's, the natural tendency to swallow saliva is reduced.

Saliva problems can lead to discomfort when talking, eating or drinking. It can also lead to problems with your teeth and increase the risk of infections occurring in your mouth.

Tips for saliva management

- Make a conscious effort to swallow your saliva often
- Be aware of foods that stimulate or make saliva stickier, such as sugary or milk-based drinks
- Ask your treating doctor to refer you to a Speech Pathologist who can assist with saliva management
- Speak with your treating doctor about medication options to help reduce or control saliva production

A dry mouth

Some people with Parkinson's experience problems from a dry mouth.

Saliva acts as a lubricant during chewing and swallowing. Saliva also has antibacterial properties to protect your teeth and mouth from decay and to neutralise acidic foods.

Tips for lubricating a dry mouth

- Take frequent sips of water to keep the mouth moist and avoid dehydration.
- Use lip balm to keep your lips moist,

particularly in the corners of your mouth.

- Remove and clean dentures at night to give your mouth chance to recover.
- Ask your pharmacist about oral lubricants and artificial saliva products.
- Visit your dentist regularly.

Support for you

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms detailed, you should work with your GP to put together a team of healthcare professionals to support you. This can include:

- A **Speech Pathologist** who can identify specific areas of difficulty, e.g. lip seal, swallowing problems, tongue awareness and can provide exercises to help overcome them. They can also assist with exercises to strengthen your swallow and reduce difficulties created by saliva.
- A **Dietitian** for advice about diet and foods that impact saliva, swallowing and mouth dryness.
- A **Physiotherapist** for advice on exercises to improve posture so saliva doesn't pool at the front of your mouth.
- An **Occupational Therapist** to advise on seating that can improve your ability to swallow.

Ask your GP to develop a chronic disease management plan, which will allow you a limited number of Medicare rebated appointments.

Fight Parkinson's is a leading source of specialised health information, advice services. Through research, education and support, we strive to improve the lives of people living with Parkinson's, PSP, MSA and CBS.

Any medical information provided is for general information purposes only. You should always talk to your doctor and qualified healthcare providers for personal medical and health-related instructions.

©2024 Fight Parkinson's. All rights reserved.