

Aspiration

What is aspiration?

Aspiration occurs when food and/or liquid goes into the airway and/or lungs (“goes down the wrong pipe”). Everyone does this at times. Some children aspirate often due to a swallowing problem that may be caused by:

- nervous system problems (cerebral palsy, meningitis, encephalopathy)
- problems in the stomach or intestines
- baby born too early, low birth weight
- heart disease
- cleft lip or palate
- conditions affecting the airway

Why is aspiration a problem?

Aspiration can cause serious problems, such as:

- respiratory illness (such as pneumonia, bronchitis)
- apnea (pauses in breathing)
- refusing to eat, often resulting in “failure to thrive” (trouble gaining weight)

What are the signs of aspiration?

Watch for these signs occurring or increasing during or right after a meal:

- coughing, choking, or gagging.
- wet or “gurgly” voice.
- increased congestion or noisy breathing.
- runny nose or watery eyes during feedings (when your child does not have a cold).
- dusky, bluish, or red color changes in the face, on or under the eyes, or around the mouth – these color changes may occur quickly or slowly.
- big changes in mood and energy level—for example, an alert child quickly turns sluggish and fussy.
- other: _____

How is it diagnosed?

Your child’s doctor may recommend a test. See the education sheet “Video fluoroscopic swallow.”

A feeding assessment by a speech language pathologist or occupational therapist may also be needed to screen for signs of aspiration, or for follow-up after a swallow study.

How should I care for my child?

If you notice any of the signs of aspiration during a meal, give your child a break. When the signs go away, continue the meal.

If you notice signs of aspiration 2 or more times in a meal, stop the meal and try again later.

Some children will need changes in food consistency, feeding techniques, or positioning. If so, your therapist will teach you. See the education sheet “Aspiration: Feeding plan.”

Good mealtime habits:

Limit distractions at mealtimes. Teach children not to run or laugh while eating.

Avoid tilting the head backward while eating and drinking.

Avoid pieces of food that are too large or too hard for the age of the child.

For more information on choking, see the education sheet “Choking infant” or “Choking child.”

When should I call the clinic?

- signs of aspiration during 2 meals in a 24-hour period
- not eating well or losing weight
- frequent breathing problems like colds, bronchitis, or other respiratory infections
- trouble breathing - **call 911**

Questions?

This sheet is not specific to your child, but provides general information. If you have questions about your child’s condition, please call the clinic. To find the other education sheets mentioned above, visit our Web site, www.childrensmn.org, and click on “Patient/Family Education Materials”

For more reading material about this and other health topics, please call or visit the Family Resource Center library, or visit our Web site: www.childrensmn.org.

Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota
Patient/Family Education
2525 Chicago Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55404
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