

# Dysphagia



# What is dysphagia?

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Dysphagia is the medical term for “swallowing difficulties”. Swallowing difficulties may lead to aspiration (food or fluid entering the lungs), lung infections, dehydration and/or malnutrition.

Swallowing difficulties can occur at any point during the swallowing process such as when:

- Sucking from breast or milk bottle teat
- Chewing and breaking down foods into small pieces to be swallowed safely
- Moving food around in the mouth
- Preparing to swallow
- Transferring food/fluids from the mouth, into the throat, down the food pipe and into the stomach



## What causes dysphagia?

Possible causes for dysphagia in children include:

- Congenital malformations of the digestive tract
- Craniofacial anomalies (e.g. cleft lip/palate)
- Gastrointestinal disorders (e.g. gastroesophageal reflux disease)
- Genetic disorders
- Neuromuscular diseases
- Prematurity
- Respiratory disorders (lung diseases)

## What are some complications of dysphagia?

- Choking and gagging
- Aspiration pneumonia
- Malnutrition and/or dehydration
- Food aversion, picky eating
- Feeding and swallowing difficulties that persist into adulthood
- Psychosocial effects on child and family



## What are the signs and symptoms of dysphagia?

Please contact your child's paediatrician if you observe any of the following:

- Coughing, choking or throat clearing during or after feeding
- Difficulty breathing when eating and/or drinking
- Gagging or vomiting during or after feeding
- Arches back or stiffens during feeding
- Gurgly voice or phlegmy throat during or post-feeding
- Long meal duration (more than 45 minutes)
- Not putting on weight or growing
- Frequent unexplained fevers or lung infections

## How is dysphagia in children treated?

The main goals for managing swallowing difficulties in children are to ensure adequate nutrition and hydration, as well as, swallowing safety. Speech therapists play a central role in managing dysphagia as they assess the child's swallowing skills and provide recommendations to ensure safe and efficient oral feeding.

Speech therapists may provide the following recommendations:

- Postural and positioning adjustments
- Modifications to food textures and liquid consistencies to ensure swallowing safety
- Exercises to facilitate development of the child's feeding skills (e.g. chewing and oral motor practice)
- Safe feeding strategies for caregivers



Safe feeding strategies include:

- Feeding only when the child is alert and awake
- Ensuring that the child is well supported during feeding (e.g. not lying down, head not tilted backwards, body not leaning to one side)
- Slowing down the rate of feeding and offering smaller mouthfuls of food
- Ensuring the child's mouth is clear before offering next spoon of food
- Cleaning the child's mouth at least twice a day

Other members of the Feeding and Nutrition Clinic are also often involved in providing holistic care to the child. The paediatrician would evaluate for and manage underlying conditions resulting in dysphagia, while the dietitian prescribes a well-balanced diet to promote good nutrition and growth.

## Useful links

- **Feeding and Swallowing Disorders in Children**  
[https://bit.ly/ASHA\\_paediatricdysphagia](https://bit.ly/ASHA_paediatricdysphagia)

### NUH Feeding and Nutrition Clinic

NUH Feeding and Nutrition Clinic is part of the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute at National University Hospital. The multidisciplinary team, consisting of paediatricians, dietitians, psychologists and speech therapists, provides a one-stop assessment clinic of your child's feeding skills and behaviours as well as feeding interactions with your family.

# About the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children’s Medical Institute (KTP-NUCMI)

The KTP-NUCMI is the paediatric arm of the National University Hospital and comprises the Departments of Paediatrics, Paediatric Surgery and Neonatology. We provide comprehensive and specialised medical and surgical services for newborns, children and adolescents, and are the only public hospital in Singapore that offers paediatric kidney and liver transplant programmes. Through a generous gift from the Estate of Khoo Teck Puat, we have set up an integrated outpatient facility with medical, diagnostic and rehabilitation services.

For more information about us, visit [www.nuh.com.sg/nuhkids](http://www.nuh.com.sg/nuhkids).

## Contact Us

### 24-hour Children’s Emergency

Location: NUH Main Building, Zone F, Level 1  
General Enquiry: +65 6772 2555

### KTP-NUCMI

Location: NUH Main Building, Zone E, Level 2 (Accessible via Kent Ridge Wing, Zone C, Level 2, Lift Lobby C)  
Operating Hours: 8.30am – 5.30pm (Mon to Fri), 8.30am – 12.30pm (Sat)  
General Enquiry: +65 6772 5736 Appointment Line: +65 6772 2002  
Fax: +65 6776 2102 Email: [ktpnucmi\\_appt@nuhs.edu.sg](mailto:ktpnucmi_appt@nuhs.edu.sg)

### 9a Viva-University Children’s Cancer Centre

Location: NUH Medical Centre, Zone B, Level 9  
Operating Hours: 8.30am – 5.30pm (Mon to Fri) Appointment Line: +65 6772 5030  
Fax: +65 6872 4314 Email: [cbccappt@nuhs.edu.sg](mailto:cbccappt@nuhs.edu.sg)

### NUH Children’s Urgent Care Clinic @ Bukit Panjang

Location: Junction 10, 1 Woodlands Road, #01-22, Singapore 677899  
Operating Hours: 9am – 11pm daily (including public holidays)  
General Enquiry: +65 6219 1538 Email: [childreucc@nuhs.edu.sg](mailto:childreucc@nuhs.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.nuh.com.sg/ucc](http://www.nuh.com.sg/ucc)

### NUH Child Development Unit @ JMC

Location: Jurong Medical Centre, 60 Jurong West Central 3, Level 2, Singapore 648346  
Operating Hours: 8.30am – 5.30pm (Mon to Fri) Appointment Line: +65 6665 2530/2531  
Fax: +65 6665 0158 Email: [cdu@nuhs.edu.sg](mailto:cdu@nuhs.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.nuh.com.sg/cdu](http://www.nuh.com.sg/cdu)

### NUH Child Development Unit @ Keat Hong

Location: Keat Hong Community Club, 2 Choa Chu Kang Loop, #03-01, Singapore 689687  
Operating Hours: 8.30am – 5.30pm (Mon to Fri) Appointment Line: +65 6769 4537/4637  
Fax: +65 6665 0158 Email: [cdu@nuhs.edu.sg](mailto:cdu@nuhs.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.nuh.com.sg/cdu](http://www.nuh.com.sg/cdu)

### National University Hospital

Location: 5 Lower Kent Ridge Road, Singapore 119074  
Tel: +65 6779 5555 Email: [NUH\\_enquiries@nuhs.edu.sg](mailto:NUH_enquiries@nuhs.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.nuh.com.sg](http://www.nuh.com.sg)



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