

# Fact Sheet



Division of Developmental Disabilities Health Care Services

## Aspiration

### Health Information Fact Sheet #3

**Aspiration** is the breathing or sucking in of any foreign material into the throat or lungs through the mouth or nose. Some examples may be: food, fluid, saliva, medications, or any non-edible object.

*Fact Sheet guidelines have been provided as general information, not as a substitution for medical treatment from a physician.*

#### Some Facts about Seizures & Aspiration:

- Aspiration can be triggered by choking.
- It may happen silently or over time without an awareness it is taking place.
- Swallowing difficulties increase the risk of aspiration.

#### Risk Factors (Causes):

Recognition of the following conditions will help alert you to potential risks:

- GERD (acid reflux)
- Cerebral Palsy
- Seizures
- Swallowing problems
- Pica behaviors
- Aging
- Hiatal hernia (stomach problems)
- Food stuffing/eating too fast
- History of choking or aspiration pneumonia
- Side effect of medications
- Inability to chew or swallow properly
- Improper positioning for adequate swallowing
- Being fed by someone else

#### What to Watch For:

There are many behaviors which can signal the potential for aspiration and include:

- Eating slowly
- Afraid of, or not wanting to eat
- Gagging/coughing/choking – during or after meals
- Refusing food or fluids
- Drooling
- Food or fluid falling out of the member's mouth
- Eating in odd or unusual positions
- Throwing head back when swallowing
- Swallowing large amounts of food or quickly stuffing mouth with food
- Refusing to eat unless assisted by favorite caregiver
- Vomiting or odor of vomit after meals

*The Aspiration Fact Sheet is #3 in a series of Health Information Fact Sheets compiled by DDD Health Care Services.*

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## What to Do:

- *Obtain a swallow study* from a professional if symptoms occur or continue.
- *Follow the diet* prescribed by the doctor or dietitian.
- *Ensure diet guidelines are specific:* food consistency, size of food pieces (such as  $\frac{1}{4}$ " ), and the texture of food.
- *Provide a slow, undistracted pace* of eating.
- *Proper positioning* during and after meals.
- *Avoid food or fluid before bedtime.*
- *Keep in upright position* for at least 45 minutes after meals.
- *Ensure all staff are trained* in assisting members with positioning, eating, and appropriate supervision.
- *CPR & first aid certification* (which includes training in the heimlich maneuver).

## Emergency

Call 9-1-1 **IMMEDIATELY** (and begin CPR if necessary) when you observe any of the following signs:

- *Turning blue*
- *Wheezing*
- *Difficulty breathing or stops breathing*
- *Gasps for breath/unable to get air*
- *Becomes unconscious* (does not respond)

