



WELLNESS BULLETIN

ASPIRATION

California Department of Developmental Services

AUGUST 2024



Is this bulletin useful?

Aspiration occurs when small objects like food, liquids, or bodily fluids enter into the lungs. Aspiration can be a major medical concern because it may lead to serious health problems such as pneumonia or other infections. Know how to understand and handle aspiration with the people that you support.

STATISTICS

Aspiration is common, even in people who are healthy. While aspiration can affect any age group, younger and older individuals have the highest risk of experiencing it.

THERE WERE **73** REPORTED UNPLANNED HOSPITALIZATIONS FOR PNEUMONIA-RELATED ASPIRATION FROM SEPTEMBER 2022 – SEPTEMBER 2023 (DDS SPECIAL INCIDENT REPORTS).



Those who aspirated were significantly more likely to have a history of recurrent chest infections.

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) who aspirate are more likely to have chronic lung disease.

People who are dependent on others for oral feeding are at the highest risk of chronic lung disease.

SOURCE: [ASPIRATION RISK - STATPEARLS - NCBI BOOKSHELF \(NIH.GOV\)](#); DDS OFFICE OF STATEWIDE CLINICAL SERVICES.



Wellness and Safety Bulletins are produced by the Department of Developmental Services to alert direct service providers, regional center staff, and others about specific risks to our community. Please provide feedback on this bulletin and what we can do better through this survey: [Bulletin Survey](#).

Factors That Increase a Person's Risk of Aspiration

- Dysphagia or difficulty swallowing
- Difficulty controlling the head, neck, tongue or the muscles in the throat
- Mobility limitations that prevent the individual from sitting up straight
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)
- Eating too quickly or putting too much food in the mouth
- Dental problems that prevent adequate chewing
- Anatomical variations such as a small airway or a large tongue



Symptoms of Aspiration

Aspiration is not always obvious. It may not seem that a person is aspirating. A person may complain about feeling short of breath or having something stuck in their throat. People who cannot self-report rely on their support team to recognize the symptoms of aspiration.



Symptoms include:

- Dehydration
- Weight loss
- Fever (that may appear 30 minutes to an hour after eating)
- Any of the following while drinking or during or after meals:
 - Gagging or choking
 - Persistent coughing
 - Feeling congested
 - A voice change, such as hoarseness, gurgling, or sounding wet
 - Shortness of breath or fatigue
- Too much saliva (may appear as drooling during meals)
- Wheezing sounds coming from the throat
- Pain when swallowing or a feeling that something is stuck in the throat
- Trouble swallowing (may appear as unusual head or neck movements)

What to Do if You Suspect Aspiration

Many people with I/DD have difficulty identifying or reporting symptoms. Symptoms of aspiration may not be visible until after it has occurred and may appear to be unrelated. **Aspiration often goes undetected.**

If someone chokes, encourage them to spit out any food or liquids remaining in their mouth.

If someone is coughing, encourage them to keep coughing as this may clear the material from their airway.

Avoid giving more food or drink until they have returned to their baseline.

Monitor anyone who chokes for potential signs of aspiration.

High risk individuals, individuals who choke multiple times, people who experience challenges with eating or swallowing, or anyone who shows signs of aspiration, should be evaluated by a medical professional.

Ways to Prevent Aspiration

Discuss these considerations with the individual and their doctor or specialist:

[Some medications can impair an individual's ability to swallow](#) (medications such as sedatives, opioids, and muscle relaxers).

Address any dental problems to ensure the individual can chew food adequately.

Adaptive equipment can help individuals eat more comfortably and lower the risk of aspiration.

[Read more about assistive devices for mealtimes](#)

Consider a modified diet:

A soft or pureed diet may be helpful

Thickeners in food and drinks can help reduce the risk of aspiration

Ensure that the individual is properly positioned when seated, especially when eating or drinking.

Provide reminders and/or prompts to slow down or take smaller bites if needed.



Source: [HIGN](#); [Cedars Sinai](#); [Mayo Clinic](#); [DDS](#).

Additional Resources

[!\[\]\(c15650232aa6660c9deb34f3b82dcb72_img.jpg\) Checklist: Aspiration/Aspiration Pneumonia Risk Factors](#)

[!\[\]\(1ed10657a19f9137278430c48fd18626_img.jpg\) My Dining Profile \(ca.gov\)](#)

[!\[\]\(4c9516d2c24d0d513bc9f84c2e013d65_img.jpg\) Personal Placemat Activity \(ca.gov\)](#)

[!\[\]\(a25a22d88c5882f4a20f36103df86562_img.jpg\) Care After Choking Incidents](#)

[!\[\]\(06b7456efb47d301bca6298603e7f4fc_img.jpg\) Cutting Board: Food and Liquid Consistencies \(ca.gov\)](#)