



# WELLNESS BULLETIN

## ASPIRATION

California Department of Developmental Services

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Is this bulletin useful?

Aspiration is when something enters into your lungs that is not supposed to be there, like foods or liquids. Aspiration can lead to serious health problems like pneumonia or other infections. The information in this bulletin will teach you how to understand and handle aspiration.

## Things that put you at risk for aspiration:

- Difficulty swallowing
- Weak head or neck muscles
- Not being able to sit up straight
- A medical condition called GERD (Gastroesophageal reflux disease)
- Eating too quickly
- Putting too much food in your mouth
- Dental problems that keep you from being able to chew your food enough
- A smaller airway or a larger tongue in some people



Wellness and Safety Bulletins are produced by the Department of Developmental Services to alert individuals, families, 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](#).

## How to tell if you might be aspirating:

- Gagging or choking during meals, or while you are drinking liquids
- Coughing a lot during or after meals
- Changes to your voice, such as hoarseness, gurgling, or sounding wet during or after meals
- Drooling during meals
- Fevers that appear 30 minutes to an hour after eating
- Shortness of breath or fatigue while eating
- Wheezing sounds coming from your throat
- Feeling pain when you swallow

**Aspiration is not always obvious.** You may feel short of breath or like you have something stuck in your throat. You might not know or feel like you have breathed something into your lungs.



## What to do if you think you are aspirating:



Call 9-1-1 if you cannot breathe air.

- Spit out any food or drink you still have in your mouth.
- If you are coughing, keep coughing to help clear your airway.
- Avoid drinking or eating until you feel better.
- Talk to your doctor if you have choked several times or think you may have experienced aspiration.

# Preventing Aspiration

Discuss any questions you have about aspiration with your support team and your doctor.

Take care of any dental or teeth problems you are having that make it hard to chew.

Talk to your doctor about the medicines you take.

Some medications can make it hard for you to swallow.

See if there is adaptive equipment available that can help you eat more easily and lower your risk of aspiration.

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

Think about changes you can make to the things you eat or drink:

Consider a soft-food or pureed diet because it is easier to swallow.

Talk with a specialist to see if you should use a thickener in your drinks.

Be sure you are sitting up straight, especially when you are eating or drinking.

Avoid eating too much or eating too quickly.

Make sure you chew your food carefully and take small bites.



## Sources

- [HIGN](#)
- [Cedars Sinai](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)
- [DDS](#)