

**Office of Integrated Health
Health & Safety Information**

Dr. Dawn M. Adams DNP, ANP-BC, CHC
Director, Office of Integrated Health

Aspiration Pneumonia

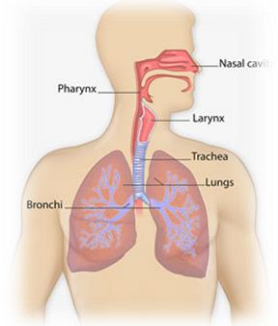
What is Aspiration Pneumonia?

Inside of the lungs are small grape-like sacs, called alveoli. Inside of these small clusters, gas exchange occurs between the air you breathe and your blood stream resulting in oxygenation of your body. When these sacs become filled with fluid, gas exchange cannot occur and can be life threatening if left untreated. Fluid can enter the lungs through a process called aspiration. Food, saliva, liquids, or vomit can all be accidentally breathed into the lungs or airways leading to the lungs, instead of being swallowed into the esophagus and stomach. Individuals, who are less mobile, less alert, eat and drink with support or independently eat or drink too fast, have continuous tube feedings and/or have multiple risk factors are at risk for aspiration.

Signs and Symptoms of Aspiration Pneumonia

An individual's risk for aspiration pneumonia increases with several factors such as:

- Being less alert due to medications or illness
- Problems with swallowing, choking, gagging or coughing with food or drink
- Eating very fast or placing large amounts of food in the mouth
- Receiving medicine that causes drowsiness or muscle relaxation
- Older age or greater than 45yo in individuals with DD
- GERD (Gastric Reflux/Acid Reflux)
- Seizures
- Tube feeding- especially continuous feeds



If an individual shows signs of frequent coughing with or after meals, this could be an indicator of impaired swallowing and subsequently of aspiration pneumonia. Additionally, shortness of breath, choking, or wheezing are also signs of aspiration pneumonia.

Aspiration Pneumonia Diagnosis and Treatment

Treatment for aspiration pneumonia depends on how severe the pneumonia is and how ill the individual was before the onset of aspiration pneumonia. Sometimes, an individual needs support to breathe during the course of the illness; this may require hospitalization. Additionally, individuals will likely receive antibiotics. Individuals may need to have swallowing function tested. People who have trouble swallowing may need to use other feeding methods to reduce the risk of aspiration.

Prevention of Aspiration Pneumonia

The key to preventing complications from aspiration is to recognize the problem and manage the associated risk. There are several risk assessment tools that can be utilized to help identify individuals who may be at risk for aspiration and dysphagia.

Being proactive by identifying those at risk will allow for interventions to be put in place to decrease the chances of complications. Adding a yearly aspiration risk assessment to be completed for all individuals is a helpful tool to identify and manage those at risk. Individuals thought to have signs of dysphagia or aspiration should be evaluated by a healthcare provider. A clear history of the signs observed and the concerns for dysphagia should be presented to the healthcare provider.

It is very important to have an individual assessed by a medical professional if aspiration or swallowing issues are suspected.

Recommendations

Individuals identified at risk for aspiration should have an individual program plan to address this issue. The program plan should address:

- Assistance level needed (including verbal or physical cues needed)
- Correct positioning for oral intake
- Adaptive feeding equipment
- Common signs of aspiration, what to do, where to document, and who to notify if these occur.

If you suspect an individual has an increased risk for aspiration pneumonia, please consult with your medical professional.

Resources

<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000121.htm>