SAFE SWALLOWING ADVICE

If your child is at risk of food or liquids going down the wrong way (aspiration), it is important that you follow these guidelines to minimise the risks as much as possible.

1. Thicken thin liquids. This can be done by adding a tasteless, colourless powder to drinks. We usually recommend either Vitaquick or Thick and Easy as they dissolve well and provide a uniform consistency. Your GP will be able to prescribe it. Aim for a cream/tomato juice thickness. A teaspoon usually thickens 50 mls adequately, but different liquids seem to require different amounts, so you may have to add a bit more or a bit less. It will also depend on what your child will tolerate. Some drinks are naturally thick e.g. tomato or mango juice, fruit nectar e.g. peach, milkshakes/smoothies, therefore don’t require thickening. The thicker liquid will move through the mouth and throat a bit slower and therefore prevent fluid rushing down the wrong way. Often the idea of thickened fluids is not appealing. However, it is important that you present this option in a positive way to your child, with lots of encouragement. It can be a simple way of decreasing some of the risk of aspiration.

2. Try not to mix eating with other activities especially talking. When you talk you open up the airway, which increases the risk of food going down the wrong way. Minimise distractions e.g. TV, toys, lots of hustle and bustle, so your child can concentrate on eating.

3. Make sure your child is sitting upright when eating or drinking. Even when having a small snack or bedtime drink, it is important that they are upright.

4. Try to ensure your child does not overfill their mouth when they are eating or drinking. This may mean slowing down the flow of liquid from a teat/beaker, or making sure they do not put lots of spoonfuls in their mouth at once. This is especially so when you are helping your child to eat.

5. Avoid foods that have mixed consistencies e.g. an orange which first squirts juice out that needs swallowing, then the fruit needs chewing well before swallowing. Liquids with lumps in e.g. cornflakes before they are soggy can present a similar problem.

6. If food gets stuck in your child’s throat and they cough, don’t wash it down with a drink, as this may go down the wrong way. Instead, encourage your child to swallow, and if this is no good, to cough. Your child may need assistance to cough strongly.

7. Your child is likely to get tired towards the end of a mealtime. Spending lots of time pushing your child to eat, often means they use up more calories in the struggle that they gain overall. If your child is tired, their muscles get tired and therefore swallowing may get worse. It is important not to push your child to take those last few mouthfuls if they are tired out.
8. Make sure your child stays upright for at least half an hour after eating. If a child has a weak swallow food may be left in the throat after a meal and this slowly has to be swallowed afterwards. If they lie down or rush around straight after, this increases the risk that this residue may go down the wrong way.

9. Make sure your child's mouth is clean after a meal. Sometimes bits of food can get stuck at the sides or up in their palate. If this unexpectedly arrives at the back of their throat, sometime after a meal, it may go down the wrong way.

If you have any questions about this information or want to discuss your child’s feeding further - do contact me on 01625 6523070.

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