

## Feeding & Swallowing Disorders

Feeding issues are one of the more consistent concerns across the preemie parent spectrum. Use this guide to help you determine if it is time to talk to your pediatrician about a referral to a speech/feeding therapist for your child.

### What are feeding and swallowing disorders?

Feeding disorders include problems gathering food and getting ready to suck, chew, or swallow it. For example, a child who cannot pick up food and get it to her mouth or cannot completely close her lips to keep food from falling out of her mouth may have a feeding disorder. Swallowing disorders, also called **dysphagia** (*dis-FAY-juh*), can occur at different stages in the swallowing process:

- **Oral Phase:** sucking, chewing, and moving food or liquid into the throat
- **Pharyngeal Phase:** starting the swallow, squeezing food down the throat, and closing off the airway to prevent food or liquid from entering the airway (aspiration) or to prevent choking
- **Esophageal Phase:** relaxing and tightening the openings at the top and bottom of the feeding tube in the throat (esophagus) and squeezing food through the esophagus into the stomach

### Signs and Symptoms of Feeding and Swallowing Disorders:

Children with feeding and swallowing problems have a wide variety of symptoms. Not all signs and symptoms are present in every child. The following are signs and symptoms of feeding and swallowing problems in very young children:

- Arching or stiffening of the body during feeding
- Irritability or lack of alertness during feeding
- Refusing food or liquid
- Failure to accept different textures of food (e.g., only pureed foods or crunchy cereals)
- Long feeding times (e.g., more than 30 minutes)
- Difficulty chewing
- Difficulty breast feeding
- Coughing or gagging during meals
- Excessive drooling or food/liquid coming out of the mouth or nose
- Difficulty coordinating breathing with eating and drinking
- Increased stuffiness during meals
- Gurgly, hoarse, or breathy voice quality
- Frequent spitting up or vomiting

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- Recurring pneumonia or respiratory infections
- Less than normal weight gain or growth

### **Feedings Disorders Leave a Child at Risk For:**

- Dehydration or poor nutrition
- Aspiration (food or liquid entering the airway) or penetration
- Pneumonia or repeated upper respiratory infections that can lead to Chronic Lung Disease (CLD)
- Embarrassment or isolation in social situations involving eating

### **Behaviors in Feeding Issues and Conditions That Can Interfere with Feeding:**

- Refuses to sit in chair
- Cries
- Spits food out of mouth
- Gags, vomits
- Verbally says “no “ to food
- Moves head away from spoon
- Refuses to open mouth
- Puts hands in front of mouth
- Throws food or utensils
- Gags before food is introduced

### **Conditions That Can Interfere with Feeding**

- Neurologic problems
- Congenital anomalies
- Metabolic disorders
- Cognitive or behavioral limitations
- Psychosocial issues
- Chronic illnesses
- GI disorders

### **Questions the Feeding Therapist Will Likely Ask You:**

Please explain any of the following:

1. Were there any complications with the birth? Premature birth or full-term? How many pounds at birth?
2. Are there any other physical challenges the little one having such as delays in crawling, fine motor, and/or speech beyond the feeding concerns?
3. Any issues with reflux, spit up, vomiting? If so, is it more than one time a day? How many times a day?
4. Is there a medication prescribed or used over the counter?
5. Is the little one getting breastfed and/or formula?
6. Is the little one comfortable when eating or feeding?
7. Is the little one under stress when she or he eating?

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8. Has the little one had a modified barium swallow test? If so, when and what were the results?
9. What does the little one eat now, i.e. liquid or only pureed, etc.?
10. Is your child going to the bathroom everyday or is he/she constipated?
11. As a mom, are you worried or extremely worried that your little one not eating?
12. Do you eat at the table or are you on the run with the little one?
13. Do you let your little one explore his/her food, playing with it, touching it, letting him/her get messy with it and have fun with it?
14. Do you realize the stomach of a little one is as big as his/her fist?
15. Do you realize that little ones sometimes go through times where they will like something and then later not like it?
16. Do you realize it takes 14x times for a little one to try a new taste and decide whether or not he/she likes it?
17. When did you notice a feeding issue vs. swallowing issue?
18. Is the little one choosing one type of food over another

**Helpful Books:**

Chatoor, M.D., Irene. *Diagnosis and Treatment of Feeding Disorders*. Washington DC: National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, 2009.

Fraker, Cheri. *Food Chaining: The Proven 6-Step Plan to Stop Picky Eating, Solve Feeding Problems, and Expand Your Child's Diet*. New York: Marlowe, 2007.

**Helpful Website:**

Parent Organized Partnerships Supporting Infants & Children Learning to Eat (P.O.P.S.I.C.L.E.) - [www.popsicle.org](http://www.popsicle.org)

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