Review of Normal Swallow and Aspiration

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The normal adult swallowing process includes four phases:

- Oral Preparatory Phase
- Oral Transit Phase
- Pharyngeal Phase
- Esophagaeal Phase
Phase 1
Oral Preparatory Phase of the Swallow

- The food is manipulated (masticated if a solid) into a cohesive unit (referred to as a bolus) in preparation for the remaining phases of the swallow

- Food is chewed and mixed with saliva to form a bolus

- Bolus is positioned on the tongue for transport

- “Chipmunk Swallow or Pocketing”, when a large bolus is partially held in the cheeks and the patient then swallows several times to clear the oral cavity—food left in the cheek is a sign of weak musculature
Phase 1: Oral Preparatory (Bolus Formation) Phase

Food (*shown in green*) has been softened and mixed with saliva and is sitting on the dorsum of the tongue.
Phase 2
Oral Transit Phase of the Swallow

- Also known as the oral propulsion or transit stage
- The food is moved back through the mouth with a front-to-back squeezing action
- Performed primarily by the tongue
- In healthy individuals, this takes approximately 1 second
Phase 2
Oral Transit Phase of the Swallow

Moving upward and forward, the tip of the tongue comes into contact with the hard palate anteriorly.
Phase 2
Oral Transit Phase of the Swallow

The area of tongue-palate contact expands posteriorly, which pushes food into the oropharynx.
Phase 2
Oral Transit Phase of the Swallow

The area of tongue-palate contact continues to increase as a portion of the food collects in the valleculae (one vallecula* on each side of the mouth)

*Vallecula: space between the epiglottis and the back of the tongue
Phase 2
Oral Transit Phase of the Swallow

The jaw reaches its maximum downward position and the tongue drops away from the palate. A portion of food remains in the valleculae.
Phase 3
Pharyngeal Phase of the Swallow

- Pharyngeal Stage, which begins with the pharyngeal swallowing response:
  - The food enters the upper throat area (above the voice box)
  - The soft palate elevates
  - The epiglottis closes off the trachea, as the tongue moves backwards and the pharyngeal wall moves forward
- These actions help force the food downward to the esophagus
- Breathing is reinitiated
- This takes 1 second
Phase 3
Pharyngeal Phase of the Swallow
The food bolus enters the esophagus (the tube that transports food directly to the stomach)

The bolus is moved to the stomach by a squeezing action of the throat muscles
Phase 4
Esophageal Phase of the Swallow
Normal Versus Abnormal Swallow

Anterior View
Tracheal Aspiration
Video Fluoroscopy
Definition of Aspiration

- Results from inhalation of stomach contents or secretions into the lungs

- In many healthy adults, very small quantities of aspiration occur frequently but the normal defense mechanisms (cough, lung cilia) remove the material with no ill effects
Signs of Aspiration

- Choking
- Coughing
- Watery eyes
- Wheezing
- Throat clearing
- SOB
- Unexplained low grade fever
- Unexplained weight loss
- Foul breath odor
- Wet/Gurgly voice
- Bluish tinged skin
- Respiratory changes/chest congestion
- Fatigue
- Refusal to eat or finish meal
- Prolonged eating times
- Pocketing food
- Drooling while eating
Symptoms of Aspiration

- Frequent cough—may have foul-smelling phlegm that may contain streaks of blood. May be greenish in color. May cough up frothy or bubbly fluid.
- Shortness of breath. Breathing is usually noisy. Their heartbeat or breathing while resting may seem faster than normal.
- Fever or chills accompanied with sweat.
- Pain in the chest, while coughing or when taking a deep breath.
- May exhibit confusion, feels dizzy, faint, or is unusually upset or anxious.
- Feeling of suffocation, their skin and fingernails may attain a bluish tinge due to lack of oxygen.
- Fatigue, wheezing and breath odor may also occur.

Symptoms of aspiration pneumonia may take several days to appear, do not ignore them!
Conclusion

- Normal swallow is a very complex function which includes multiple body systems including the nervous system, musculoskeletal system, GI system and respiratory system.
- The signs and symptoms of aspiration pneumonia can quickly get worse, if it is not properly diagnosed and treated.
- **Aspiration pneumonia can be life-threatening and should be considered an emergency**