

Management of Aspiration Pneumonia Risks: Information for Direct Care Staff

Texas Department of Aging & Disability Services
www.texasqualitymatters.org

Definition

Aspiration pneumonia is a lung infection caused by passing of mouth secretions, stomach contents, or both in to the lungs. Some times secretions from the mouth dribble into the lungs. Some times stomach contents may come up and go to the lungs. Usually they are cleared out by coughing before they can get in to the lungs. If the cough is not strong or cannot cough the secretions may go to the lungs and cause an infection. When such secretions are not cleared, they can cause aspiration pneumonia.

Types of Pneumonia

There are many different types of pneumonia: The most common types are caused by either a bacterial or a viral infection. Pneumonia can effect one or both lungs.

- **Community acquired pneumonia** is when you get pneumonia in places such as at work, school etc:
- **Hospital-acquired pneumonia** occurs 48 hours or more after admission to a hospital.
- **Healthcare-associated pneumonia** is defined as pneumonia that occurs in a an individual that had not been hospitalized, and has healthcare contact for a long time such as residence in a nursing home or other long-term care facility.

Individuals at High Risk of Aspiration Pneumonia:

- Have health problems such as stroke, head injury, seizures, multiple sclerosis, or Parkinson's disease (diseases that effect chewing, swallowing and positioning).
- Are not fully awake and/or are positioned on their back
- Have a gastrostomy or nasogastric tube (tube in the abdomen or through the nose to provide nutrition and fluids).
- Have a tracheostomy (Tube in the neck connected to the airway).
- Receive a large amount of tube feeding
- Are positioned on their back
- Have limited range of motion that interfere with daily functioning. (having problems doing daily activities due to weakness, tightness ,deformities in the arms legs and /or body)
- Have problems keeping food down and vomits frequently
- Have difficulty swallowing

What are the Warnings Signs of Swallowing Problems?

Monitor the individual who:

- Have food left over in the mouth after swallowing
- Make unusual movements of the head and neck when swallowing
- Feels pain when swallowing, or feels like something is stuck in the throat
- Coughs or chokes when eating or drinking
- Has a wet or gurgle-like voice after swallowing
- Drools or has food or fluid leak out of the nose
- Has a voice change after swallowing

Signs and Symptoms of Aspiration Pneumonia May **Include:**

- Coughing or a cough that produces secretions or phlegm
- Difficulty breathing, whistling sounds or unusual sounds from the chest.,
- Unusual fast breathing
- Fever, chills, sweating
- Chest pain during coughing or deep breathing
- Feeling dizzy, faint, or confusion
- Generalized feeling of discomfort, illness, or lack of well-being
- Muscle pain
- Feeling anxious
- Feeling like they can't get enough air
- Skin, lips or fingernails may turn dusky or blue
- Loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, headache
- Exhaustion

If You Suspect Aspiration or Aspiration Pneumonia

- Inform the nurse and document if the individual coughs/tries to clear the throat during a meal.
- Notify the nurse immediately if you witness an individual vomiting.
- Notify staff if an individual has poorly fitted dentures and poor oral hygiene.
- Notify the nurse if any of the signs/symptoms of aspiration and/or aspiration pneumonia are present.
- Notify the nurse if you think the individual appears sick.

How Can I be Proactive?

- Pay attention to individuals during mealtime who are coughing, trying to clear throat, etc. and report to the appropriate staff and document.
- Make sure the individuals get the correct diet including correct texture.
- Follow guidelines developed by OT, PT and Speech staff including special feeding equipment, positioning equipment and program, and having the head of the bed elevated 30 - 45 degrees, etc.
- Brush teeth three times daily. Take to dental appointments as scheduled. Make sure dentures fit.
- Position properly for eating and drinking.
- Encourage good health habits (proper diet, cleanliness, regular rest and exercise).