



The Fatal Five: Aspiration



What is aspiration?

When we swallow, a flap-like structure in the back of the throat, called the epiglottis, covers the airway so that food, drink, and saliva go into the esophagus and travel to the stomach. Aspiration happens when the epiglottis doesn't close over the airway properly and allows swallowed material to get into the airway and travel to the lungs.

What causes aspiration?

Aspiration can happen as a result of swallowing problems, dental issues, structural issues in the throat or esophagus, or a reduced gag/cough reflex. Some medications, like sedatives and muscle relaxers, can also raise the risk of aspiration.

WHAT ARE THE FATAL FIVE?

The fatal five are preventable conditions that can be deadly for individuals with I/DD. The five conditions are:



Dehydration



Seizures



Constipation



Aspiration



Sepsis



Why is aspiration dangerous?

When the body can't clear aspirated food or liquid, life-threatening complications can result. These include:

- Aspiration pneumonia
- Abscesses in the lungs
- Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), which happens when an injury causes fluid to build up in the lungs
- Collapsed lung
- Inflammation in the lungs

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of aspiration include:

- Coughing
- Feeling like something is stuck in the throat
- Noisy breathing or wheezing
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Bluish color in the skin, lips, fingertips or nails
- Fever

Sometimes, the individual doesn't have any initial symptoms and may not know they aspirated. This is called silent aspiration and even though the individual didn't show any signs or feel any discomfort, they can still develop complications. Also, it's important to remember that some individuals with I/DD may not understand what happened and won't report it to their caregivers.

What can DSPs do to help prevent aspiration?

Because of the time you spend with the individuals in your care, you may be the first to spot signs of aspiration or issues that could increase aspiration risk.





Here are some things you can do to help prevent aspiration:

- **Watch for choking**

Choking puts an individual at high risk for aspiration. If they're coughing, encourage them to keep coughing because it may help clear their airway. Do not give them any additional food or drink until they return to their baseline. Monitor anyone who chokes for signs of aspiration.

- **Report dental issues**

Dental issues increase the risk of aspiration. Report any dental issues you notice so they can be taken care of as soon as possible.

- **Watch for new or increased difficulty swallowing**

Swallowing difficulties are not uncommon in individuals with I/DD. If you notice that an individual is having trouble, or if their swallowing difficulties are getting worse, be sure to report it.

- **Encourage slower eating**

If an individual eats too much too fast, they put themselves at high risk for aspiration. Encourage them to slow down, take smaller bites, and chew their food thoroughly.

- **Be vigilant with certain medications**

If the individual is taking sedatives, muscle relaxers, or opioids, monitor them carefully. These medications affect the nerves and muscles used in swallowing and can inhibit the natural reflexes that normally prevent aspiration.

- **Document**

As a primary caregiver, you know an individual's baseline. If you see any changes, especially in their ability to swallow, be sure to document it. You should also document episodes of choking, whether or not there are signs of aspiration.