

Assistance to eat and/or drink for people with physical difficulties

There are different kinds of assistance that can be provided. Sometimes this is to help a person get food or drink to their mouth. Sometimes it is to make sure that strategies suggested are followed, as some people need reminders or prompts to carry these out.

Physical assistance is used if a person is unable to hold or manage cutlery or crockery themselves. Once a person is fully assisted (that is when someone else is doing everything – holding crockery/cutlery and placing it in the person's mouth), **the risk of aspiration increases.**

It is therefore safest to **offer the least amount** of assistance that is required. Eg:

1. Supervision and encouragement: this is support to ensure that a person is using the correct utensils, load food onto a fork or spoon, make sure they are managing.
2. Verbal prompts: this is where you tell the person what they need to be doing. It might be: a prompt to put the food into the mouth, lift the cup etc.
3. Light Physical support: this is where you provide physical support to increase the safety of the way the person eats. It might be: taking the weight of a cup, steering food into the mouth by guiding arm or hand.
4. Hand on hand support: this is where you support the person to hold the crockery/cutlery themselves but fully move their hand or arm with your hand.

Full assistance

This is when you hold the cutlery/crockery and place food/drink into the person's mouth. They do not play any physical part in this process. This will increase the risk of aspiration/choking and it is a skilled role. It should only be used if necessary. The person assisting should:

- Give their full attention to this task, especially watching for the movement of the Adam's apple which indicates a swallow has occurred.
- Sit at the person's height and ensure they are within the person's sight
- Consider the best utensil to use (see 'Utensils for Eating' or 'Utensils for Drinking').
- Check the food is correctly prepared if the person is having a modified diet.
- Check the person is ready for each mouthful before putting it in the mouth. Sometimes hovering the fork at the lips will prompt the person.

- Check the swallow has occurred and the mouth is mainly cleared of the previous mouthful, before putting any more in the mouth. It might take several swallows to clear the mouth.
- Allow time between mouthfuls for the person to take a breath or two.
- Check after three to four mouthfuls that food is not building up inside the mouth. If this is the case, give time and prompts to clear it. Do not keep offering food if it is not being cleared.
- If food is not being cleared, offer an empty spoon or fork right into the mouth, as if it had food on it, as this will sometimes prompt a 'chew and swallow' movement.
- If the person coughs, give time to recover before carrying on.
- Offer mouthcare after meals and snacks to ensure mouth is left clean.

You may find there are some people in your team who seem to get better results when they are the ones assisting.

It can be helpful to watch how they are assisting people and learn from them. Similarly, it may be helpful for them to watch other people assisting, and see if they can offer some suggestions.