

Oral Holding – Some Useful Tips

What? 	Oral holding is when people hold food/drink in their mouth without swallowing it.
 Why?	This could be because the person: • Becomes distracted and loses focus on eating. • Gets stuck and can't begin the next task in the sequence of eating or drinking e.g. stuck on either step 1 or 2 of the eating sequence: 1. take food from fork/spoon 2. Chew 3. Swallow. • Finds it hard to trigger a swallow due to weak or uncoordinated muscles.
The Danger 	• Food and drink held in the mouth can be swallowed the wrong way. • This could block the air way and cause choking or be swallowed into the lungs (known as aspiration). • Aspiration can sometimes cause a chest infection called aspiration pneumonia and can be life threatening. • Reduced oral intake can impact nutrition.
What can you do? 	• There is no definite solution. A number of things could be helpful. • Try the following things and see what works best for the person you are supporting:

Before the meal - Set up  	• Always provide supervision with food and drink watching closely for a swallow with each mouthful – assistance may be needed. • Reduce distractions at mealtimes to facilitate concentration and awareness e.g. avoid unnecessary interruptions, clear clutter from the table. • Ensure the atmosphere is calm. • Allow plenty of time for meals. • Consider the use of insulated containers to maintain the temperature of food if mealtimes take longer due to oral holding. • Try offering more intensely or highly flavoured food and drinks as these can sometimes stimulate a more effective swallowing reflex. • Try alternating temperature within a meal e.g. try interspersing a hot meal with a chilled drink or vice versa.
During the meal - If holding occurs   	• Use verbal prompts to remind the person to swallow and provide a demonstration. • Offer an empty spoon or fork towards the mouth. This can prompt the person to swallow without introducing more food. • Rub cheeks and/or under the chin to help prompt them to the food in their mouth and support them to initiate a swallow. • If possible, encourage a 'clearing swallow' or 'saliva swallow' to assist in clearing residue from the mouth • If food or drink is held in the mouth and the above strategies don't work support the person to bring their head forward and encourage them to spit the contents into a napkin or bowl. • You may need to support them to open their mouth. Do this by gently placing an empty spoon on their bottom lip or the corner of their mouth and apply a little pressure.
After the meal 	• Ensure the mouth is clean and free from residue at the end of the meal to prevent any food being aspirated later. You can do this with a damp cloth, toothbrush or mouth cleanser. • Checking the mouth and cleaning it at intervals during the day may be necessary. • Good oral hygiene is important (see oral care advice for further details).

Medication 	If tablets are held in the mouth and are difficult to swallow: • Contact the GP or pharmacist for advice regarding soluble or dispersible alternatives or the possibility of crushing the tablets. • Try putting tablets in yoghurt or custard - check with pharmacist or GP first that it is safe to do so.
Things to watch out for 	• Any deterioration in swallow e.g. coughing/ more coughing when eating and drinking, choking. • Weight loss (advice on adequate nutrition can be sought from a dietician). • Chest infection, speak to your G.P or call NHS 111 – symptoms include: fever, shortness of breath, chest persistent cough producing green or yellow mucus, chest pain, tiredness.