

Screening swallowing problems in Parkinson's: nurse in charge/ward staff guide

Some people with Parkinson's may find they have problems with eating, swallowing and controlling their saliva. Symptoms may be made worse by medications not being given on time.

People with Parkinson's must have their ability to swallow medication considered at the earliest opportunity to ensure they continue to receive their medications on time. Aspiration refers to food and fluid entering the lungs; with aspiration pneumonia being the leading cause of death for people with Parkinson's (Patel et al 2020). Identifying those at risk of aspiration pneumonia will allow earlier intervention, reducing mortality risk, the length of their acute illness and impact on their physical health and dependency.

To help ensure swallowing problems are considered for every hospital admission of a person with Parkinson's, please implement the following.

Staff training

Understanding the warning signs of aspiration is a key strategy to ensure swallow safety:

- coughing or throat clearing whilst eating and drinking
- wet voice quality or breathing changes whilst eating and drinking
- choking or food sticking in the throat
- tablets sticking in the throat.

Implement a swallow screening checklist or add these key questions to your admissions paperwork:

- Does the individual have any difficulties swallowing their medication?
- Are they getting their Parkinson's medication on time?
- Are they coughing when they are eating or drinking?
- Does the individual's voice quality sound wet when they are offered a drink/medication?
- Is there evidence of more than 2 chest infections in the last year?
- Have they been seen by speech and language therapy (SLT) in the past for swallowing difficulties?

These questions can be asked by any healthcare professional to determine if a referral to speech and language therapy is needed. However, a swallow screening assessment needs to be performed by a trained professional who knows the clinical signs of aspiration and the main swallowing changes that occur in Parkinson's.



The water swallow test and other swallowing screens including self-report measures and questionnaires have all been found to be **unreliable** in identifying aspiration risk. Timely referral to speech and language therapy (SLT) is recommended. If access to SLT is delayed you should consult your feeding at risk documentation and carry out a person-centered discussion with the medical team and family to agree on the safest consistency of food as an interim measure. You may also need to consider alternative formats of medications eg dispersible or non-oral medications.

Ensure procedures are robust

Prioritise access to speech and language therapy (SLT) or another trained professional able to screen swallowing ability. Immediately document any risks associated with administering oral medication. Implement your hospital's local clinical guideline for the administration of medication if the patient has to be placed nil by mouth (NBM).

Information and support

- Please contact your local Parkinson's specialist nurse for advice.
- For advice about swallowing please contact your local Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) team.
- For further information about time critical Parkinson's medication including ordering resources, tools and training for health and care professionals visit parkinsons.org.uk/time-critical-medication-resources or scan the QR code below.



- Download our booklet 'Caring for your patient with Parkinson's' at parkinsons.org.uk/caring-patient-booklet or scan the QR code below.



- Our 'Hospital pharmacy time critical Parkinson's medication' guide was developed by healthcare professionals to support hospital pharmacy staff in implementing time critical Parkinson's medication management. Find it at parkinsons.org.uk/hospital-pharmacy-time-critical-medication-guide or scan the QR code below.



- Our 'Nurse in charge/ward staff' guide was developed by healthcare professionals to support hospital ward staff in implementing time critical Parkinson's medication management. Find it at parkinsons.org.uk/time-critical-medication-nurse-ward-guide or scan the QR code below.



Further reading

Links to the following documents can be found in the 'Further reading' section at parkinsons.org.uk/time-critical-medication-resources

- 'Rapid Response Report NPSA/2010/RRR009: Reducing harm from omitted and delayed medicines in hospital'. National Patient Safety Agency (2010)
- 'Commissioner's Guide to the NCEPOD Report - 'Hard to Swallow?'. A review of the quality of dysphagia care provided to patients with Parkinson's disease aged 16 years and over who were admitted to hospital when acutely unwell. The National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death (NCEPOD)
- 'Hard to Swallow?' A review of the quality of dysphagia care provided to patients with Parkinson's disease aged 16 years and over who were admitted to hospital when acutely unwell. A report published by the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death (2021)
- 'A comprehensive review of the diagnosis and treatment of Parkinson's disease dysphagia and aspiration'. Patel et al 2020. Expert Review of Gastroenterology & Hepatology: Vol 14, No 6 (tandfonline.com)
- 'A New Simple Screening Tool - 4QT: Can It Identify Those with Swallowing Problems? A Pilot Study'. Tsang, K et al 2020. PMC (nih.gov) Geriatrics. March 5(1):11

About this guide

This guide has been developed by healthcare professionals in the Parkinson's Excellence Network to support ward staff in implementing time critical Parkinson's medication management.

This guide was last reviewed in October 2023. Please visit the Excellence Network website to check for revisions and updates at parkinsons.org.uk/time-critical-medication-resources

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