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The Stages of Swallowing

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Eating is something we do every day, but have you ever thought about how your body makes it possible? Let's take a look at the three main stages of swallowing—each one is a special part of a big team effort.

1. Oral Stage

The oral stage is the first step in eating, and it has two parts: preparing the food and moving it around in your mouth.

When you start eating, your mouth senses the taste, smell, and feel of the food. Your tongue helps mix the food with saliva to make a soft, chewable ball called a "bolus." The tongue moves the bolus around to help chew the food until it's safe to swallow. As the bolus moves to the back of the throat, it triggers the next step in the process of swallowing. If the bolus isn't moved properly, it could cause problems with swallowing.

2. Pharyngeal Stage

The pharyngeal stage happens when the food reaches the back of your throat. At this point, your throat and mouth muscles work together automatically to swallow. The soft part of the roof of your mouth (the soft palate) moves up to close off your nose from your

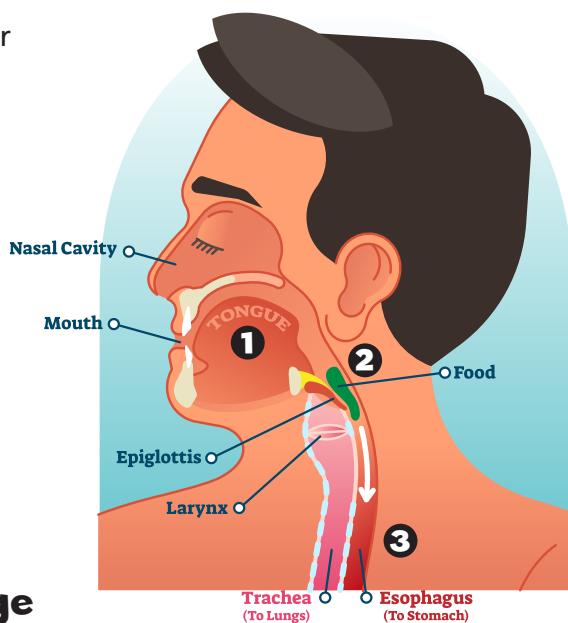
throat. Your vocal cords close, and a small flap (the epiglottis) covers your windpipe to make sure the food goes down the right way into your esophagus (the tube that leads to your stomach). Your throat muscles then push the food down into the esophagus.

3. Esophageal Stage

In the esophageal stage, the food travels down your esophagus to your stomach. This happens through a series of muscle movements called peristalsis, which are like waves pushing the food down. The upper part of the esophagus opens to let the food in, and then closes to keep it from coming back up. At the bottom of the esophagus, there's another muscle that keeps the food from coming back up from the stomach.

If there are problems with the nerves or muscles in any of these stages, it can cause trouble with swallowing, which is called **dysphagia**. People who are diagnosed with dysphagia work with different experts to improve swallowing difficulties.

For example, speech-language pathologists help people with techniques for swallowing safety while physical therapists or occupational therapists help with core stability and positioning to improve swallowing efficiency.



Resources:

Sonies, Barbara C. "Considerations in Evaluating and Treating the Oral Stage of Swallowing." *Swallowing and Swallowing Disorders*. Accessed August 29, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1044/sasd12.1.13>

Panara, Kush, et al. "Physiology, Swallowing". *StatsPearls*. Accessed August 29, 2024. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK541071/>

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