

LeDeR Learning Brief 1.1

Eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia)



The **LeDeR programme** aims to improve care, reduce health inequalities and prevent early deaths of people with a learning disability and autistic people. Email us at somicb.leder@nhs.net for further information.

Case Study: This learning brief draws on the Coroner's report regarding a person with learning disabilities and autism in Somerset, who choked and subsequently died. They had been assessed by Speech and Language Therapy and their care plan stated bread products such as sandwiches should be served cut into pieces no bigger than 1.5 cm by 1.5 cm. They were served a sandwich cut only in half and not in accordance with the professional advice. They choked on the sandwich and suffered a fatal hypoxic brain injury.

The Coroner also commented on the negative effects changes in medication had on their last year of life. Whilst this wasn't the cause of the actual choking incident he felt strongly that it contributed to mental and physical deterioration and that their change in behaviour around eating was a symptom of this.

- This case is a key driver in improving the safety of eating and drinking support in Somerset. Without this, further deaths may occur. The Coroner identified that better training should be given to staff in respect of choking risks. In this case it was felt the risk of choking did not appear to have been adequately recognised by staff.
- The Coroner stated that improved training of staff, carers and their respective managers may have the potential to increase adherence to meal time recommendations and lessen the risk of choking.

Further to the Coroner's report this Learning Brief highlights areas of good practice in supporting people with eating, drinking and swallowing needs.

Learning from Deaths

In the King's College 2021 LeDeR report dysphagia is listed as one of the five most frequently reported long term health conditions in 23% of people who died and who had received an initial review. See the full report here [leder-main-report-hyperlinked.pdf \(kcl.ac.uk\)](#)

Systems

Don't wait to make a referral to Speech and Language Therapy (SLT). If you have any concerns or have noticed changes to a person's eating, drinking and swallowing don't delay, make a referral today.

Referrals can be made directly to SLT
CTALDhealthreferrals@somersetFT.nhs.uk

Reflections for Health

Supporting people with **dysphagia** often involves multi-disciplinary working as mouth care, medication, seating, breathing and the environment are key factors in safe eating and drinking **as well as** the consistency of the food and drink.

Practice

- Print and display this "Back to Basics" poster to remind staff of basic best practice when supporting someone with dysphagia at mealtimes. These basics help make mealtimes enjoyable and safe [my-eating-and-drinking-matters.pdf \(iddsi.org\)](#)

- Medication changes can affect a person's eating and swallowing or mealtime behaviours. If there are any concerns refer to SLT ASAP for advice.

Practice Part of safe support at mealtimes is getting the consistency of the food and drink right for that person. If this has been advised by a SLT in a care plan it is essential this advice is followed. This advice will refer to the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI). Find out more about IDDSI here [IDDSI - Home](#) And watch videos on how to prepare every IDDSI level here [NHS Dorset Dysphagia and swallowing difficulties videos.](#)

Knowledge

[HEE elfh Hub \(e-lfh.org.uk\)](#) offers FREE staff training. Eating, drinking and swallowing safely is key to staying healthy. Increased staff awareness about how to support someone with dysphagia will lead to better outcomes and better health. The SLT team also have information about local training.

Leadership and Culture

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has produced guidance for care home managers about how best to support people with dysphagia:

[guidance-on-the-management-of-dysphagia-in-care-homes.pdf \(rcslt.org\)](#)

Processes

An eating and drinking care plan written by a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) must NEVER be transcribed into another format and should only be changed in consultation with SLT.