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Difficulty Swallowing

Difficulty swallowing may indicate a problem in the upper portion of the gastrointestinal tract. Symptoms of pain or discomfort with swallowing, or the sensation that swallowed food does not go all the way down, may be caused by a variety of conditions, ranging from minor to quite serious.

A sudden onset of severe neck or throat pain with swallowing suggests the possibility of a foreign body in the throat. For example, a small fish bone may have become lodged in the throat or upper esophagus.

The sudden onset of severe pain with swallowing, felt up and down the chest in the midline, especially if occurring in a young individual, may indicate a viral infection in the esophagus. The infection causes inflammation, or irritation, of the lining of the esophagus, called "esophagitis." This type of viral infection is typically short in duration, lasting only two to three days.

A similar irritation of the esophageal lining, with identical symptoms, can result from a chemical inflammation of the esophagus. For example, certain medications may cause esophagitis if they are in prolonged contact with the lining of the esophagus. For this reason, medications - especially Fosamax, antibiotics such as tetracyclines, and pain pills such as aspirin and ibuprofen - should never be taken just before lying down at night, and never without at least 8 ounces of water.

A potentially more serious problem is the feeling that food becomes "stuck" on its way down to the stomach. Such a sensation implies that the esophagus has become too narrow to permit easy passage of the food.

One possible cause of this sensation is esophagitis, where the lining of the esophagus has become so irritated, swollen and thickened that the esophagus becomes narrow. This may occur in GERD (gastro-esophageal reflux disease, also known as acid-reflux or hiatal hernia disease), where stomach acid

of scar tissue causes additional narrowing of the esophagus and worsens any difficulty in swallowing.

Radiation treatments may cause inflammation of the esophagus, resulting in narrowing of the esophagus.

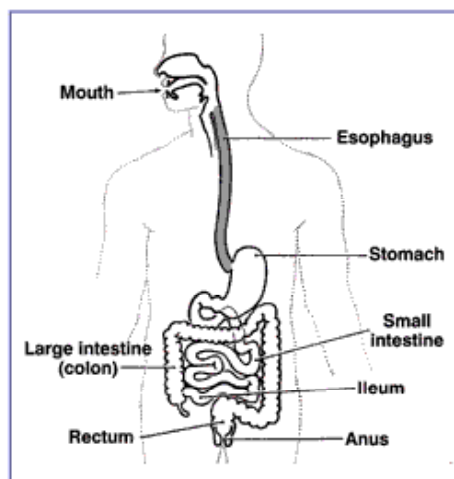
A less common, though potentially serious cause of esophageal narrowing, is a tumor of the esophagus. Tumors of the esophagus may be benign or malignant.

A tumor arising within the chest cavity, for example in the lung, may also cause difficulty in swallowing by compressing the esophagus from outside the esophagus.

Neurologic disorders, such as stroke, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, myasthenia gravis, polio and others, may cause impairment of the coordination of the muscles of the mouth and throat, resulting in difficulty in swallowing.

Very rare symptoms may simply be caused by eating too quickly, failure to chew food thoroughly, attempting to swallow too much, or even by anxiety, and may not require evaluation. Frequent or persistent symptoms, however, should always be evaluated.

Most causes of difficulty swallowing are not life-threatening, and can be treated medically or with endoscopic instruments, rather than surgery. Difficulty in swallowing deserves an early evaluation, to ensure a prompt diagnosis and timely treatment.



flows upward into the esophagus causing irritation (reflux esophagitis). Such inflammation may be severe enough to cause an ulcer in the lining of the esophagus, which may in turn contribute to any discomfort in swallowing.

Long-standing reflux esophagitis can, over time, result in the development of scar tissue in the esophagus. This layer