



Northumbria Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Clear Water Guidelines

A guide for patients, families and carers

Issued by the speech and language therapy department



Setting the Scene

Difficulties with swallowing, known as 'dysphagia', can have a vast number of causes (e.g. stroke, head injury, dementia, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Parkinson's disease etc).

Dysphagia can result in food or fluid 'going down the wrong way' into the lungs rather than the stomach, known as 'aspiration'. This in turn can cause chest infections, pneumonia, choking and ultimately death.

Dysphagia can be treated with a range of changes to the consistencies of food/fluid, therapeutic exercises and positioning, or alternative feeding options such as a nasogastric tube (NGT) or a feeding tube into the stomach known as a Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy (PEG).

The clear water guidelines are a technique that can either be used as a therapeutic rehabilitation technique in isolation or alongside other diet and fluid changes to help improve the person's swallowing, or as a strategy to maximise someone's quality of life and comfort.

What do the water guidelines involve?

The water guidelines allow patients who are known to have an unsafe swallow to drink plain water using the following guidelines:

- Encourage the person not to drink alone (wherever possible) so that there is someone with them should they require assistance.
- Position the person upright in a chair or propped upright in bed.
- Ensure the person has not eaten or taken any medication within the last 30 minutes.
- Ensure the patient's mouth is thoroughly clean including their teeth or dentures.
- Encourage the person to drink small mouthfuls slowly.
- Encourage the person not to talk whilst drinking.
- Keep noise and distractions to a minimum during drinking.
- Encourage the person to stop drinking if they are showing signs of difficulty or discomfort (e.g. coughing) or if they are tiring/falling asleep and try again later on.
- Ensure the person only drinks plain water and does not eat anything or take any medications at the same time.

Why use the water guidelines?

The water guidelines allow the person to continue to use their swallow (sometimes with the aim of making it stronger) whilst minimising the risk to their lungs caused by foods or other fluids. Plain water is considered safer as it is easily absorbed by the body. It can also assist with maximising the person's quality of life and comfort as they may find adapted fluid textures unpleasant.

What else do we need to think about?

The clear water guidelines are not risk-free. It essential to consider:

- Do others need training/assistance to feel comfortable giving fluids to a patient with known swallowing difficulties?
- Is everyone involved with the patient aware of the restrictions of the water guidelines?
- Has a plan been agreed about what to do in the event of the patient developing complications as a result of the decision to use the water guidelines (e.g. chest infection/pneumonia.)?

If you have questions or concerns regarding the above information, please contact your local speech and language therapy team on the numbers below, or the medical team caring for your relative/friend/loved one.

Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital

Non– stroke: 07825658042

Stroke: 07771371771

North Tyneside General Hospital 0191 293 2712

Wansbeck general Hospital 01670 529748

Hexham General Hospital 01434 655084



Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

Other sources of information

NHS 111

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

www.nice.org.uk

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

www.northumbria.nhs.uk

PIN 831/V1

Review date: April 2022

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