When Drinking or Eating is Not Safe

Children usually eat and drink to get the nutrition they need to sustain life and grow. Sometimes when a child eats or drinks, the food or liquid does not move safely from the mouth to the stomach. Instead, it goes the wrong way towards the lungs and goes lower than the vocal cords. This is called aspiration.

How do I know if my child aspirates?
A Modified Barium Swallow Study (MBS) is a test which shows the movement and location of food and drink during swallowing. The study shows aspiration as it happens.

How serious is it if my child aspirates?
Aspiration is dangerous to your child’s lungs and long-term health. If your child aspirates, they may develop the following:
- frequent lung infections
- chronic lung disease
- pneumonia
- less ability to prevent ongoing aspiration

What can be done to help my child swallow safely?
It is important to take steps to keep your child from aspirating. A treatment using thicker liquids is sometimes used to stop aspiration. Please keep in mind that sometimes a child may even aspirate thick liquids. In these situations, we often recommend putting in a feeding tube. A feeding tube is a soft flexible tube which goes through the nose and extends into the stomach or upper intestine. The tube is used to give your child the nutrition and liquids they need to grow.

If your child aspirates, the medical team will focus on the following 3 factors:

1. Safety
   - Safety lays the foundation for your child’s care.
   - Safety usually means stopping your child from eating and drinking the foods and liquids they aspirate.
   - Stopping aspiration is the most important factor.

2. Nutrition and hydration
   - Your child’s feeding therapist and doctor may recommend placement of a feeding tube.
   - Your child’s medical team, including a dietitian and/or doctor, will recommend the best ways to provide nutrition and hydration to sustain life and support growth.

3. Eating and drinking
   - Your child’s feeding therapist may recommend ways to modify eating and drinking. A period of time during when your child does not drink and/or eat may also be recommended.
Will my child stop aspirating?

If your child aspirates, the likelihood that they will stop aspirating depends on many factors. These may include:

• the cause of aspiration
• the sensation of the throat
• other co-existing conditions
• changes over time

What are the next steps if my child aspirates?

There are a variety of “next steps” which your feeding therapist may recommend. These may include:

• feeding therapy
• scheduling additional appointments with doctors and medical teams
• repeating the MBS to re-evaluate your child’s swallow function in the future