

## HEALTH & SAFETY: ENTERAL FEEDINGS

### “Managing Signs and Symptoms of Feeding Tube Problems”

*BQIS/Outreach Fact Sheets provide a general overview on topics important to supporting an individual’s health and safety and to improving their quality of life. This is the second of two Fact Sheets regarding Enteral Feedings.*

#### Objectives

Individuals will be aware of signs and symptoms displayed by someone who receives medication, fluids and/or nutrition by a feeding tube that indicate potential problems or illness.

#### Definitions

**Feeding Tube:** A special type of flexible tubing that allows a person to receive nutrition, hydration, and medication through the tube instead of by mouth. Some feeding tubes are in the stomach, and others in parts of the small intestine.

**Residual:** Stomach contents remaining in stomach after a specified period of time following a feeding.

**Stoma:** Opening between the stomach or intestine into abdomen in which a feeding tube is inserted.

**Aspiration pneumonia:** lung infection or irritation resulting from a foreign substance such as food or liquid getting into the lungs.

**Choking:** A process in which a person is unable to adequately breathe due to a blockage in the airway.

#### Facts

Recognizing and acting upon signs and symptoms that may indicate problems with feeding tubes could prevent serious illness or even death.

## Recommended Actions and Prevention Strategies

*The list of signs and symptoms presented in this fact sheet is not intended to be all-inclusive. Person-specific directives and interventions should always be followed. If ever in doubt, contact a health-care professional or supervisor.*

### **1. Stop feeding and Call 911 if person is choking or having difficulty breathing.**

#### **Signs of Choking include:**

- Gasp for air
- Sudden inability to talk, cry or make sounds
- Beginning to turn blue in the face
- Grabbing at the throat with a look of panic

### **2. Stop Feeding IMMEDIATELY and Contact a Health-Care Professional or Your Supervisor if the following occurs:**

- Coughing
- Formula-colored liquid in mouth
- Spitting up or vomiting formula
- Wheezing, gurgling, or whistling breathing sounds
- Tubing comes partially or completely out
- Any other concern that the tube is not in the correct position
- During Feeding:
  - Stomach Ache
  - Vocalization of distress
  - Abdominal distress
  - Change in facial expression
  - Wriggling more than baseline amount
- Blood or coffee-ground appearing substance coming out of feeding tube or in residual

### **3. Contact a Health-Care Professional or Your Supervisor if the following occurs:**

- Signs of Aspiration Pneumonia such as: fever (may be low grade); restlessness; tiredness; listlessness; rapid, shallow or labored breathing; gray, pale, red or bluish skin or lips
- Excess intestinal gas; belching; abdominal bloating; holding abdomen; restlessness; grimacing; drawing into fetal position
- Diarrhea greater than 3 times in 24 hours or as otherwise directed
- No Bowel Movement by morning of third day or as otherwise directed
- Sudden increase in residuals (if greater than 50 cc's or as otherwise instructed, hold feeding)
- Gradual increase in recorded residuals
- Change in Stoma appearance such as redness of surrounding skin; swelling; pain; warm to touch; yellow, green or white pus or discharge
- Fever

- Pain
- Increased sleeping
- Formula flow slows or stops
- Bleeding around stoma site
- Formula or stomach contents leaking around stoma site
- Weight loss or gain of more than 2 pounds a week or as otherwise directed
- Interruption of normal feeding or medication administration schedule

## Learning Assessment

Questions that can be used to verify a person's competency in the material contained in this Fact Sheet:

1. True or False: You should be concerned about aspiration pneumonia for a person with a feeding tube if you notice a change in their breathing pattern or skin coloring.
2. When would it not be necessary to stop a tube feeding immediately before calling a health care professional or your supervisor?
  - A. You see formula colored liquid in the person's mouth.
  - B. You notice the person is sleeping more today than normal.
  - C. The feeding tube has slipped out of the stomach about 1 inch.
  - D. The person's facial expressions become distressed looking during a feeding.
3. Which of the following would least likely be something you would track for a person with a feeding tube based solely on the fact they had a feeding tube?
  - A. Weekly weights
  - B. Bowel movements
  - C. Blood pressure
  - D. Sleep patterns

## References

Mary Ciccarelli, MD, Associate Professor of Clinical Pediatrics and Clinical Medicine, Associate Chair of Education in Pediatrics, Indiana University School of Medicine

State of California Department of Health Services Licensing and Certification  
Program Developmental Services

## Related Resources

Fact Sheet, "Enteral Feedings - Best Practice"  
"Feeding Tube" protocol

## Learning Assessment Answers

1. True
2. B
3. C

## Outreach Services

1-866-429-5290 • [outreach@fssa.in.gov](mailto:outreach@fssa.in.gov) • [DDRSOutreach.IN.gov](http://DDRSOutreach.IN.gov)

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