Pharyngeal pouch

A condition causing swallowing difficulties and throat symptoms.

What is a pharyngeal pouch

A pharyngeal pouch is a small pocket that can form in the wall of the throat (pharynx), just above the oesophagus (food pipe). Food and drink can collect in the pouch, which may lead to symptoms such as difficulty swallowing or a feeling of food getting stuck.

What are the symptoms

Common symptoms include:

- Difficulty swallowing (especially solids).
- Food coming back up shortly after eating.
- Coughing or choking when eating.
- Bad breath (halitosis).
- A gurgling noise from the throat.
- Feeling of something stuck in the throat.

What causes it

The exact cause isn't always clear, but it's thought to happen when the muscle at the top of the oesophagus doesn't relax properly during swallowing. This causes pressure to build up, leading to a pouch forming in a weak area of the throat wall.

Is it serious

A small pouch may cause few problems. Larger or symptomatic pouches can lead to choking, food entering the lungs, chest infections, dehydration or weight loss. These problems need assessment and should not be dismissed as harmless.

How is it diagnosed

Your doctor may refer you for tests to confirm the diagnosis. These can include:

- A barium swallow X-ray.
- A camera test may be used to assess the throat or other causes. Nasendoscopy alone does not usually establish the size and extent of a pouch.
- A CT scan, in some cases.

How is it treated

Treatment depends on how severe the symptoms are. Small pouches that cause few problems may not need treatment, just monitoring.

Options include:

- Observation and lifestyle advice.
- Swallowing therapy with a speech and language therapist.
- Procedures through the mouth usually divide the shared wall and tight muscle to help the pouch empty. Open surgery through the neck is another option; the best approach depends on anatomy and symptoms.

Tips to manage symptoms

- Eat slowly and chew food well.

- Follow individual advice about safe food and drink textures. Do not force food down with water if drinking makes you cough or choke.
- Sit upright while eating and after meals.
- Avoid eating late at night.

When to see a doctor

Seek prompt assessment for worsening swallowing, choking with meals, unexplained weight loss or repeated chest infections. Swallowing therapy may help you manage symptoms but does not remove the pouch.

Get urgent help if you cannot swallow saliva or fluids. Call 999 if choking prevents you from breathing, speaking or coughing effectively.

About this information

This leaflet explains the condition and common treatment choices. Your care team will advise what is suitable for you. If you have an operation, follow the specific preparation and aftercare instructions provided by your hospital.

Further information

Kent Community Health swallowing with a pharyngeal pouch