Brain Injury - Swallowing Difficulties/Dysphagia
New Mexico

What is dysphagia?
Swallowing difficulties, also known as dysphagia, are usually an indication of a problem with the throat getting food and liquids from the back of the mouth to the stomach. This may occur as a result of a brain injury in children or adults. Previous eating patterns may change, and there may be new challenges in managing food in the mouth and throat. Swallowing may become uncomfortable and awkward.

Symptoms of dysphagia may include the following:
1. Changes in eating food or drinking liquid
   - Avoiding eating and drinking with others
   - Fear of eating and drinking
   - Avoiding foods and/or liquids
   - Unable to take oral medication
   - Longer mealtimes
   - Needing to change head and neck positions during swallowing
   - Difficulty with keeping food in mouth and/or chewing and swallowing
   - Coughing, and/or choking on food or liquid during or after eating and/or drinking
2. Changes in the ability to use mouth
   - Difficulty speaking as clearly as before the injury, or having a wet hoarse voice
   - Drooling or losing food from the mouth
   - Collection of food or saliva in the mouth after eating
   - Frequent clearing of the throat
   - Difficulty brushing teeth
3. Complaints or observations
   - Feels like something is stuck in the throat or chest; patting the throat or chest following swallowing
   - Foods, liquids, or digestive acids coming up into the throat and/or mouth
   - Unexplained weight loss
   - Discomfort or pain with swallowing
   - Frequent respiratory infections

If these symptoms are present:
- When these symptoms are present, an eating evaluation should be considered.
- Typically, the doctor will make a referral to a speech language pathologist (SLP) or to radiology for a video swallow study.
- The SLP can evaluate and treat dysphagia to help eat and drink as safely as possible.
- Referrals for children may be made to the pediatric Supports and Assessment for Feeding and Eating (SAFE) Clinic. This clinic provides assessments for children, birth to age 17.