

Trouble swallowing?

BY MICHAEL A. VELIUONA, MD



Dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing, is a common symptom presented to gastroenterologists. Patients may experience dysphagia to solid food, liquids, or both, and the type of dysphagia may suggest an underlying etiology.

Diagnostic testing to evaluate patients with dysphagia symptoms include barium swallow performed by a radiologist and upper endoscopy performed by a gastroenterologist. Upper endoscopy is the preferred modality as it allows for direct visualization, biopsies, and therapeutic intervention such as dilation.

The most common causes of dysphagia are esophageal strictures, eosinophilic esophagitis (EoE), or esophageal webs or rings. These causes of dysphagia are often easily treated with upper endoscopy and esophageal dilation or swallowed topical steroids in the case of EoE. Esophageal strictures often occur in the setting of acid reflux so anti-acid therapy is often required in addition to dilation. The most common type of esophageal ring is called a Schatzki's Ring which occurs at the junction of the esophagus and stomach. A single dilation of the Schatzki's Ring often provides long-term relief although repeated dilations may be

necessary in a minority of patients.

The most serious cause of dysphagia in older patients is esophageal cancer. Patients typically report progressively worsening dysphagia to solids which then may progress to liquid dysphagia as well. These patients also often experience chest pain, poor appetite, and weight loss. Upper endoscopy is again the test of choice as it allows for diagnosis and biopsy.

There are also motility disorders of the esophagus such as achalasia which can lead to dysphagia symptoms. These can be challenging to diagnose as the esophagus often appears normal on upper endoscopy, but a functional test called esophageal manometry may be helpful.

Most causes of dysphagia can be successfully treated with esophageal dilation or medication. Patients with dysphagia symptoms should seek medical attention as a referral to a gastroenterologist for upper endoscopy may be necessary. Upper endoscopy (with or without dilation) is a relatively safe and easy procedure and often results in long-term relief of dysphagia symptoms.

