

New study finds that aging can make it more difficult to swallow

July 26 2018

As adults age, they all experience a natural loss of muscle mass and function. A new study finds that as the loss of muscle and function in the throat occurs it becomes more difficult for efficient constriction to occur while swallowing—which leads to an increased chance of food and liquids being left over in the throat.

The study, published in *Dysphagia* by Sonja M. Molfenter, an assistant professor of communicative sciences and disorders at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, and her colleagues, helps to explain why 15 percent of seniors' experience dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing.

Among other health issues, swallowing difficulties can lead to malnutrition, dehydration and pneumonia—from food and drinks being misdirected into the lungs. Swallowing difficulties can also have an [economic impact](#). Other studies have demonstrated that when patients with dysphagia are admitted to the hospital, they normally experience a 40 percent longer length-of-stay than those without dysphagia—estimated to cost \$547,000,000 per year.

Molfenter and her colleagues noted that dysphagia in older adults is particularly relevant as the proportion of seniors in the United States is projected to increase to over 20 percent by 2030.

"*Dysphagia* has serious consequences for health and quality of life," said Molfenter, the study's lead author. "This research establishes the need

for exercise programs for [older adults](#) that target [throat muscles](#) just like those that target the muscles of the arms, legs and other parts of the human body."

More information: Sonja M. Molfenter et al, Volumetric Changes to the Pharynx in Healthy Aging: Consequence for Pharyngeal Swallow Mechanics and Function, *Dysphagia* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s00455-018-9924-5](#)

Provided by New York University

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