

Positioning at Mealtimes

Good posture while eating and drinking is essential. A stable upright and well-aligned position allows more energy and effort to be concentrated upon the actual process of eating, drinking and swallowing. Anyone who eats or drinks in an awkward position can become at risk of *inhaling* food and/or fluid, or even choking.

Eating in a comfortable, stable position encourages better coordination of the muscles used to bite, chew, swallow and breathe. This is because a stable position allows more energy and effort to be concentrated on the process of eating and drinking.

Some people have problems with muscle tone, difficulty controlling and coordinating movements and possible muscle weakness. For example, a person may have difficulty maintaining a stable posture due to altered muscle tone which can lead to inconsistent patterns of body movement (eg cerebral palsy), muscle weakness (eg muscular dystrophy), lethargy, fatigue, ill health and/or altered conscious states (eg seizures). These difficulties can directly interfere with the ability to eat and drink safely and efficiently.

Attention to positioning and possibly the need for specialised equipment or adapted utensils may be required. Adequate time should be taken to ensure individuals are positioned optimally and that recommended equipment is used correctly.



Guidelines for optimal positioning at mealtimes:

- Upright, straight body alignment; with shoulders over hips level shoulders, slightly forward and in line with the hips
- Bottom and hips well back into the chair to provide a stable base for the trunk (eg use of pelvic strap)
- Knees at around 90 degrees and comfortably apart (eg a pommel or padded wedge or block may be needed to help separate the knees)
- Feet comfortably apart and resting on the floor or a support where possible (eg footstool or footplates on a wheelchair or highchair)
- Head centred over the shoulders with an elongated neck, in a relaxed, upright and slightly chin-tuck position (remember head back will open the airway and swallowing is extremely difficult and unsafe)
- Shoulder straps, chest harness can provide added support where advised
- Head and neck positioning can be assisted by a well positioned head rest or even the use of a rolled towel, small cushion or even a neck brace (where advised)
- Generally arms forward on the table or tray
- Where possible students should be encouraged to move slightly forward towards the food, spoon, or drink as this is part of the normal active process for eating or drinking
- Often a small wedge cushion or angled seat base can assist this for students who have better trunk control and more active movement
- For students who are unable to do this, ensure positioning is optimal and head on neck alignment is suitable for swallowing (eg elongated neck and slight chin tuck).

Refer to the individual's oral eating and drinking care plan for specific information documenting individual care needs.

Positioning for the person assisting at mealtimes:

- Sit in front or to the side of the person you are assisting so you are at eye level, this encourages a forward head and chin position for safe eating and swallowing
- Ensure you are comfortable and stable
- Have equipment and utensils positioned within easy reach.

