

## Patient Information

# Cricopharyngeal Hypertrophy

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## What is Cricopharyngeal Hypertrophy?

**Cricopharyngeal Hypertrophy** refers to the **thickening or dysfunction** of a small muscle called the **cricopharyngeus**, located at the top of your oesophagus (food pipe). This muscle acts like a valve—it opens when you swallow, letting food and drink pass from your throat into your oesophagus, and then closes to prevent backflow.

When this muscle becomes **too thick or stiff**, it may not relax properly. This can make swallowing uncomfortable or difficult.

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## What Causes It?

The exact cause isn't always clear, but several factors may contribute:

- **Age-related muscle changes:** More common in older adults
- **Chronic acid reflux (GERD)**
- **Neurological conditions** such as stroke or Parkinson's disease
- **Previous surgery or trauma** to the neck or oesophagus
- **Chronic coughing or throat clearing**
- **Radiation therapy** to the neck area

In many cases, it's simply part of the natural aging process.

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## What Are the Symptoms?

Symptoms can vary but often include:

- **Difficulty swallowing**, especially solids
- A sensation that **food is getting stuck** in the throat
- **Frequent throat clearing**
- **Coughing or choking** when eating or drinking
- **Regurgitation** of food shortly after eating
- Feeling of **pressure or fullness** in the lower throat or upper chest
- **Hoarseness** or changes in voice (in some cases)

Symptoms may be mild at first but can become more noticeable over time.

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## How is it Diagnosed?

If you're experiencing symptoms, your doctor may refer you for one or more of the following tests:

- **Barium swallow test:** An X-ray video taken while you swallow a special liquid, showing how well your muscles work
- **Flexible endoscopic evaluation of swallowing (FEES):** A thin camera inserted through the nose to observe swallowing
- **Esophageal manometry:** Measures pressure and coordination of swallowing muscles
- **CT or MRI:** Occasionally used to rule out other issues

These tests help confirm the diagnosis and rule out conditions like tumors or strictures.

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## How is it Treated?

Treatment depends on how severe your symptoms are and what the underlying cause may be.

### 1. Non-Surgical Treatments:

- **Swallowing therapy:** Exercises and strategies provided by a speech and language therapist to improve muscle coordination
- **Diet changes:** Softer foods, slower eating, smaller bites, and proper posture
- **Acid reflux management:** Medications like proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) to reduce inflammation or irritation
- **Botulinum toxin (BoNT-A) injection:** Temporarily relaxes the cricopharyngeal muscle to improve swallowing

### 2. Surgical Treatment (if symptoms persist):

- **Cricopharyngeal myotomy:** A minor surgery to cut the tight muscle, permanently relaxing it and improving swallowing
- **Oesophageal dilation:** Stretching the narrowed area using a balloon or instrument during endoscopy

Your doctor will help you decide which option is best for your situation.

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## What is the Outlook?

Many people experience **significant improvement** with treatment—especially with therapy and dietary adjustments. If surgery is needed, success rates are generally high, and complications are uncommon.

It's important to follow up regularly with your care team, especially if you have other medical conditions that affect swallowing.

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## **Tips for Managing Symptoms at Home**

- Eat slowly and chew food thoroughly
  - Avoid dry, crumbly, or sticky foods
  - Take sips of water between bites
  - Sit upright while eating and remain seated for 30 minutes afterward
  - Avoid eating late at night or lying down after meals
  - Use any prescribed medications consistently
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## **When to Contact Your Doctor**

Let your healthcare provider know if you:

- Are losing weight unintentionally
  - Frequently cough or choke when eating
  - Feel like food is stuck often or becomes painful to swallow
  - Regurgitate undigested food regularly
  - Have trouble managing symptoms despite treatment
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## **Final Thoughts**

Cricopharyngeal hypertrophy can be uncomfortable, but it is manageable with the right care and support. You're not alone, and there are effective treatments that can help you enjoy meals and live comfortably.

If you have questions, speak with your doctor or a speech and language therapist—they're here to help.