UNDERSTANDING YOUR ANATOMY:
Normal Swallowing & Aspiration

MOST OF US don’t think about the important action of swallowing until something interferes with it. Swallowing moves food and fluid from our mouth, and into the stomach through a tube called the esophagus. Because we use our mouth and throat to both breath and swallow, our body must make sure that air goes into the airway, and food or fluid goes down our esophagus. If food or fluid does get into the airway, we naturally cough to protect our lungs. If the cough doesn’t remove the material, or we don’t cough at all, aspiration occurs and we are at risk for a serious lung infection called pneumonia.

Normal Swallow:
In a normal swallow, food is brought into the mouth and the tongue guides the food into the throat. The epiglottis folds down completely to direct what is swallowed towards the esophagus and away from the airway.

Aspiration Process:
During aspiration, food is not directed properly from the mouth to the throat and the epiglottis does not completely fold to protect the airway. Food or liquid then escapes towards the vocal folds, then into the airway, and eventually into the lungs.
If the material reaches the lungs, there is a risk for infection or pneumonia. While usually treatable with antibiotics, for some it can be a life-threatening event.