

Article

Medication-related swallowing difficulties may be more common than we realise

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Authors:



I. Strachan



M. Greener

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Abstract

A literature review suggested that swallowing difficulties are common among elderly people and potentially can undermine good nutrition, impair quality of life and complicate medication administration. Dysphagia, for example, can affect patients' ability to take solid oral dosage forms, which could compromise adherence and therapeutic outcomes. Age-related physiological changes, certain concurrent medications and some diseases can also contribute to swallowing difficulties among older people. However, the literature search failed to identify any studies that examined the prevalence or characteristics of medication-related dysphagia in the general community. It also failed to identify a validated method to diagnose or screen for swallowing difficulties in the patient groups likely to present to community pharmacists. A preliminary survey was therefore conducted locally to determine whether there was any evidence that difficulties in swallowing solid medications were common in the community. **Almost 60% of patients enrolled in the survey experienced difficulties swallowing tablets or capsules.** Furthermore, 68% of those surveyed needed to open a capsule or crush a tablet to swallow their medication. A similar proportion (69%) admitted not taking a tablet or capsule because it proved hard to swallow. Seventy-two per cent of patients and carers reported that their doctor or nurse never ask if they have difficulties taking tablets or capsules before writing their prescriptions. Further studies are needed to examine the causes, prevalence and management of medication-related dysphagia in community-dwelling populations. In the meantime, pharmacists should remain vigilant for swallowing problems in the elderly, continue counselling patients about medicine administration and suggest alternative formulations where appropriate.

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