

## Community-based Nutritional Care

### Identifying barriers to dysphagia assessment in primary care a Canadian survey of primary care dietitians

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**Introduction:** Dysphagia or difficulty swallowing affects nearly 35% of older adults in the community and is a significant risk factor for malnutrition, aspiration and respiratory infections. Early intervention is important to minimize these risks. Yet, little is known about the dysphagia assessment practices of dietitians in the Canadian primary care setting.

**Objectives:** To learn more about dysphagia assessment practices of dietitians working in primary care in Canada.

**Methods:** A 17-question, on-line survey of dysphagia identification and assessment practices was developed with content and face validity confirmed through survey pilot and expert consultation. Registered dietitians practicing direct nutrition care in the primary care setting were invited to participate through Dietitians of Canada networks, newsletter advertisements and consenting provincial dietetic colleges. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey.

**Results:** Of the 70 surveys completed, only 8% (6/70) reported clinical swallowing assessments were completed by the dietitian. The two most common barriers were lack of competency/skills required to complete a clinical swallowing assessment (47/70) and not enough personnel/resources (18/70). Approximately 27% were either not sure or did not believe clinical swallowing assessments fell within their scope of practice. Over 70% (51/70) reported needing hands on dysphagia assessment training.

**Conclusions:** Dysphagia is prevalent in the primary care setting. Access to timely clinical swallowing assessments by dietitians could help expedite intervention and help minimize the consequences of unmanaged dysphagia. However, lack of competency/skills required to complete dysphagia assessments and uncertainty about dietitian scope of practice for dysphagia were commonly cited barriers to successful dysphagia assessment.

**Significance to the Field of Dietetics:** The high percentage of dietitians who felt they lacked the skill to conduct a clinical dysphagia assessment is concerning. It appears additional training and education is needed to enable primary care dietitians to develop competency in dysphagia assessment and management.

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