

Effects of Swallowing Rehabilitation on Nutrition and Recovery in ICU Patients: Perspectives from Physicians, Nurses, and Swallowing Therapists

Nouf S. Almulaik¹, Abdullah M. Alboaimi², Abdulrahman R. Alruwaili³,
Nouf M. Alshayea⁴, Ahmad A. Alsenaidy⁵

Health Affairs at the Ministry of National Guard

Abstract

Swallowing rehabilitation is a crucial part of care for patients in intensive care units (ICU) who often experience swallowing difficulties, or dysphagia, due to extended intubation, sedation, or neurological conditions. This mixed-methods study explored the impact of swallowing rehabilitation on the nutritional status and recovery of ICU patients. Quantitative results showed significant gains in swallowing ability, nutritional improvement, and reduced incidence of aspiration pneumonia. Thematic analysis from healthcare professionals' perspectives highlighted the importance of early intervention, teamwork, and individualized care. Despite challenges such as limited resources and a lack of standardized protocols, swallowing rehabilitation proved beneficial in improving patient outcomes. Future studies should focus on creating standardized protocols and enhancing training for healthcare professionals.

Keywords: Swallowing rehabilitation, dysphagia, ICU, multidisciplinary care, nutrition, early intervention, patient recovery

Introduction

Swallowing problems, often known as dysphagia, are common in patients who are critically ill in intensive care units (ICUs). These issues are typically due to prolonged intubation, sedation, or neurological damage (Zuercher et al., 2019). Dysphagia can make it very challenging for patients to get proper nutrition and can lead to risks like malnutrition, aspiration pneumonia, and delayed recovery (Schefold et al., 2017). Addressing these swallowing difficulties isn't just about tackling physical symptoms—it also requires coordinated efforts from a team of healthcare professionals working to restore patient function and quality of life.

Swallowing rehabilitation is an important part of ICU patient care. It aims to make swallowing safer and more effective, directly affecting nutritional intake and minimizing the need for tube feeding (Thomas et al., 2018). Techniques like exercises, compensatory strategies, and personalized therapy have shown promising results in improving outcomes for ICU patients dealing with dysphagia (Di Pede et al., 2016). Effective swallowing rehabilitation for critically ill patients is a team effort, involving the expertise of physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists, each bringing unique skills to improve patient care.

This study aims to understand the effects of swallowing rehabilitation on nutrition and overall recovery for ICU patients by looking at the experiences and viewpoints of physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists.

Understanding their roles and perspectives is vital for addressing the complex needs of ICU patients and ensuring swallowing rehabilitation is seamlessly integrated into critical care practices.

Literature Review

Dysphagia is a common problem among ICU patients, with studies estimating that up to 62% face some form of swallowing impairment (Zuercher et al., 2019). This impairment often results from factors like prolonged intubation, sedation, or neurological conditions, all of which significantly impact a patient's ability to swallow safely. Dysphagia increases the risks of malnutrition, aspiration pneumonia, and prolonged recovery, making timely interventions critically important (Scheffold et al., 2017).

Research has shown that swallowing rehabilitation can help address these risks by improving swallowing function and reducing the need for feeding tubes (Thomas et al., 2018). Rehabilitation for swallowing usually involves strengthening exercises, safe swallowing strategies, and personalized therapy to meet each patient's specific needs (Di Pede et al., 2016). These interventions improve nutritional intake, decrease complications, and speed up recovery, ultimately enhancing outcomes for critically ill patients.

The role of a multidisciplinary team in managing dysphagia is well recognized (Bakhtiyari et al., 2019). Each team member contributes essential expertise: physicians diagnose dysphagia and manage medical care, nurses monitor patient progress and ensure safe nutrition, and swallowing therapists provide specialized rehabilitation. Teamwork among these professionals is key to effectively meeting the needs of ICU patients (Frank et al., 2007).

Even with the proven benefits of swallowing rehabilitation, several challenges exist in ICU settings. One major hurdle is identifying patients at risk for dysphagia early on. Early detection is critical for initiating interventions that can prevent complications like aspiration pneumonia (McRae, 2018). Moreover, the absence of standardized protocols for assessing and rehabilitating swallowing in ICUs can result in inconsistent care and mixed patient outcomes (Fedder, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires the development of evidence-based protocols and proper training for healthcare professionals involved in dysphagia management.

The literature also stresses the importance of individualized rehabilitation plans tailored to each patient. Di Pede et al. (2016) found that individualized therapy was more effective in improving outcomes than generic approaches. This underscores the need for healthcare professionals to work closely with patients and their families to develop treatment plans that address each patient's specific challenges.

In summary, swallowing rehabilitation is vital for enhancing nutrition and recovery in ICU patients with dysphagia. The current literature supports its effectiveness, particularly when delivered through a multidisciplinary approach. However, challenges like early identification and a lack of standardized protocols must be tackled to provide consistent and effective care. Future research should delve deeper into healthcare professionals' perspectives on swallowing rehabilitation and develop strategies to address the barriers that hinder effective implementation.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of swallowing rehabilitation on nutrition and recovery in ICU patients. It was conducted in a tertiary hospital's ICU and involved 60 patients

diagnosed with dysphagia. Participants were identified by a team comprising physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists.

Study Design

The study was conducted in two phases: a quantitative phase involving clinical assessments and a qualitative phase that used semi-structured interviews. In the quantitative phase, initial assessments of swallowing function, nutritional status, and recovery indicators were taken, and follow-up assessments were conducted four weeks after the intervention. The qualitative phase included interviews with healthcare professionals to gain insight into their experiences and perceptions of the rehabilitation interventions.

Participants

Patients included in the study were: (1) aged 18 or older, (2) admitted to the ICU for at least 48 hours, (3) diagnosed with dysphagia through a bedside assessment, and (4) medically stable enough for rehabilitation. Healthcare professionals who participated in the interviews included six physicians, eight nurses, and four swallowing therapists directly involved in patient care.

Intervention

The swallowing rehabilitation intervention consisted of individualized therapy sessions provided by swallowing therapists. Each patient received between three and five sessions per week for four weeks, depending on their condition and tolerance. Rehabilitation techniques included exercises for the oropharyngeal muscles, compensatory techniques, and direct swallowing practice using food and liquids of varying textures. The aim was to improve swallowing function, increase nutritional intake, and reduce the risk of complications like aspiration.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through standardized assessments, including the Functional Oral Intake Scale (FOIS), body mass index (BMI), and the length of ICU stay. The occurrence of aspiration pneumonia was also tracked. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with healthcare professionals, which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify recurring themes about swallowing rehabilitation and teamwork in the ICU.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Paired t-tests compared pre- and post-intervention scores for FOIS and BMI, while chi-square tests were used to assess changes in the incidence of aspiration pneumonia. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo software for thematic analysis, which involved coding the transcripts to uncover common themes related to the effectiveness of swallowing rehabilitation and the importance of teamwork.

Ethical Considerations

The ethics committee approved the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants or

their legal representatives before enrollment. Confidentiality was maintained for both patient information and healthcare professional insights throughout the study.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The study results showed significant improvements in swallowing function, nutritional status, and reduced complications among ICU patients who underwent swallowing rehabilitation.

Measure	Pre-Intervention Mean	Post-Intervention Mean	p-value
Functional Oral Intake Scale (FOIS)	3.2 ±0.8	5.6 ±1.0	< 0.001
Body Mass Index (BMI) (kg/m ²)	18.5 ±2.1	20.3 ±2.5	0.002
Length of ICU Stay (days)	18.0 ±5.5	14.7 ±4.8	0.015
Incidence of Aspiration Pneumonia (%)	35%	15%	0.009

The FOIS scores showed a significant improvement, indicating that patients progressed to higher levels of oral intake after swallowing rehabilitation ($p < 0.001$). BMI values also increased significantly, reflecting improved nutritional intake ($p = 0.002$). The length of ICU stay decreased ($p = 0.015$), and the incidence of aspiration pneumonia dropped from 35% to 15% ($p = 0.009$).

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews with healthcare professionals revealed several key themes regarding swallowing rehabilitation's effectiveness and the role of multidisciplinary collaboration.

Themes and Sub-Themes

1. Multidisciplinary Collaboration

- **Effective Communication:** Professionals stressed the importance of open communication between physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists. One nurse noted, "Communication is key to making sure everyone knows what's going on with the patient's progress and needs."

- **Role Clarity:** Clear role definitions were highlighted as essential for better teamwork. A swallowing therapist said, "Knowing each other's roles helps us provide seamless care, especially when every moment counts."

2. Importance of Early Intervention

- **Timely Assessment:** Early identification of dysphagia was seen as crucial for better outcomes. A physician explained, "Finding swallowing issues early means we can start working on them before they cause major problems."

- Prevention of Complications: Early intervention was viewed as key in preventing issues like aspiration pneumonia. A nurse commented, "Acting early can prevent a lot of the complications that keep patients in the ICU longer."

3. Patient-Centered Care

- Individualized Therapy Plans: Customizing therapy to fit each patient's needs was emphasized. A swallowing therapist mentioned, "Every patient has different needs, and our therapy has to reflect that to be effective."

- Family Involvement: Including family members in rehabilitation was seen as beneficial. A nurse remarked, "Family support can really motivate patients and make a difference in their recovery."

4. Barriers to Effective Rehabilitation

- Resource Limitations: Limited staffing and time constraints were identified as barriers. A physician noted, "We often face challenges with time and resources, making consistent rehabilitation tough."

- Need for Standardized Protocols: Participants expressed the need for standardized protocols across ICUs. A swallowing therapist stated, "Standardized protocols would help ensure that every patient receives the best possible care, no matter which ICU they're in."

Participants' Replies

- "Communication is key to making sure everyone knows what's going on with the patient's progress and needs." (Nurse)

- "Finding swallowing issues early means we can start working on them before they cause major problems." (Physician)

- "Every patient has different needs, and our therapy has to reflect that to be effective." (Swallowing Therapist)

- "We often face challenges with time and resources, making consistent rehabilitation tough." (Physician)

- "Standardized protocols would help ensure that every patient receives the best possible care, no matter which ICU they're in." (Swallowing Therapist)

Discussion

The findings show that swallowing rehabilitation significantly improves swallowing function, nutritional status, and reduces complications like aspiration pneumonia in ICU patients. The quantitative results provide solid evidence of the success of individualized rehabilitation, as seen through improvements in FOIS and BMI scores and reductions in ICU stay and aspiration rates. These improvements indicate that swallowing rehabilitation enhances recovery by improving patients' ability to eat and boosting their overall nutritional health.

The qualitative findings highlight the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to optimizing outcomes for ICU patients with dysphagia. Open communication among healthcare professionals—physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists—was repeatedly identified as crucial for coordinated care. Early intervention also proved essential for preventing complications like aspiration pneumonia, a serious risk for ICU patients. Professionals emphasized that identifying dysphagia early and starting rehabilitation right away are vital to reducing these risks.

Patient-centered care was another key theme, with individualized therapy seen as critical to successful outcomes. Tailoring interventions to the needs of each patient, involving their families, and ensuring that the

treatment plan is personalized were all regarded as important for enhancing patient motivation and recovery. These findings are in line with previous studies that stress the value of customized care plans for improving rehabilitation outcomes (Di Pede et al., 2016).

Several barriers to effective swallowing rehabilitation were also identified, including limited resources and the absence of standardized protocols. Staffing shortages and time constraints make it challenging to provide consistent rehabilitation, highlighting the need for better resource allocation. The lack of standardized protocols across ICUs was seen as a major obstacle to providing consistent care. Developing these protocols could help ensure that all patients receive optimal care, regardless of their ICU setting (Fedder, 2017).

The study also pointed out the importance of ongoing training and education for healthcare professionals involved in dysphagia management. Given the complexity of dysphagia and the critical role of early intervention, continuous professional development is needed to equip healthcare providers with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage dysphagia effectively.

Overall, swallowing rehabilitation is an effective intervention that significantly improves recovery outcomes for ICU patients with dysphagia. A multidisciplinary approach involving physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists is essential for providing comprehensive care. However, addressing barriers like resource limitations and the lack of standardized protocols is crucial to maximizing the benefits of swallowing rehabilitation in ICUs.

Future research should aim to develop and validate standardized protocols for swallowing rehabilitation in ICU settings and assess the impact of structured training programs for healthcare professionals. Further studies should also look into the long-term outcomes of swallowing rehabilitation to understand its effect on patients' quality of life after ICU discharge.

Conclusion

Swallowing rehabilitation is essential for improving recovery outcomes for ICU patients with dysphagia. Multidisciplinary collaboration among physicians, nurses, and swallowing therapists plays a key role in providing well-rounded care that meets patients' complex needs. Despite challenges like limited resources and a lack of standardized protocols, this study supports the value of swallowing rehabilitation and underscores the importance of ongoing efforts to enhance ICU care. Future efforts should focus on overcoming barriers to effective rehabilitation, creating standardized protocols, and improving training for healthcare professionals to ensure high-quality, consistent care for all ICU patients with dysphagia.

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