

Swallowing Exercises

For patients with head and neck cancer starting radiation treatment

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- How radiation treatment can cause swallowing problems
- How swallowing problems can affect your health
- How to identify a swallowing problem
- How swallowing exercises may prevent swallowing problems
- How to do your swallowing exercises during and after treatment



How does radiation treatment affect your swallowing?

The side effects from radiation treatment to the head and neck area can cause short- and long-term swallowing problems.

- **Short-term swallowing problems** are due to changes in saliva, thick mucus, pain and swelling in the mouth and throat, which can make it difficult to swallow.
- **Long-term swallowing problems** can set in months or years after treatment has finished. Muscles in the mouth and throat become stiff making it difficult to swallow food, liquid or your spit.

Swallowing problems, if left untreated, can cause weight loss and dehydration. They can also cause aspiration pneumonia (a chest infection caused by food or drink going down the windpipe).

What are the symptoms of a swallowing problem?

A swallowing problem can be any change in the way you swallow your food, drink or saliva (spit). When eating and drinking, the following symptoms can indicate a swallowing problem:

- coughing or clearing your throat
- a wet or gurgly sounding voice
- needing extra liquid to wash down solid foods
- food sticking in your throat
- needing more effort to swallow
- trouble chewing
- extra swallows needed to clear a mouthful
- liquid coming “back up” through your nose or mouth
- needing more time to complete a meal

If you have any of these symptoms, speak to any member of your health care team, including a nurse, doctor, dietitian, radiation therapist or speech language pathologist.

What can you do to prevent swallowing problems?

We use 30 different muscles when we swallow. It is important to keep these muscles working by **continuing to eat during treatment** and by **doing swallowing exercises during and after treatment has finished**. The exercises shown in this pamphlet help to stretch and strengthen the muscles in your mouth and throat.

How to do your swallowing exercises

You can do these exercises when it is best for you (for example, before meals, in the waiting room, after you brush your teeth).

During treatment: do all exercises 3 times each day.

After treatment: continue to do all exercises once a day to keep your swallowing muscles working.

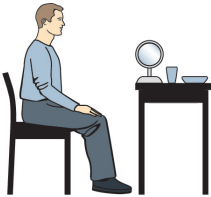


Repeat each exercise 5 – 10 times.

Useful tips:



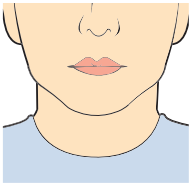
Control your pain.



Sit upright.



Use a mirror.



Rest in between exercises.



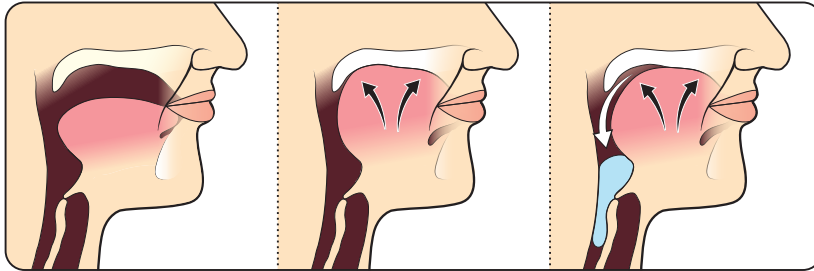
Rinse your mouth and spit between exercises.



Exercise 1: The Effortful Swallow

To strengthen your throat muscles

If you are eating by mouth, do this exercise with each mouthful after you chew your food.



Start with your tongue at rest.

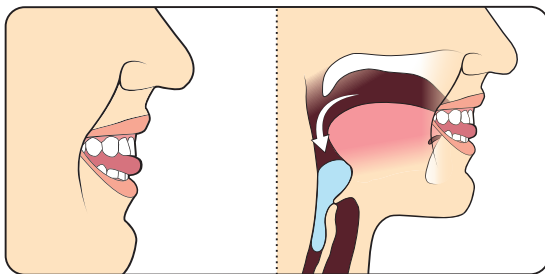
Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth as hard as you can.

Swallow as hard as you can.

Rest and rinse if needed. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Exercise 2: The Masako Technique

To strengthen your throat muscles



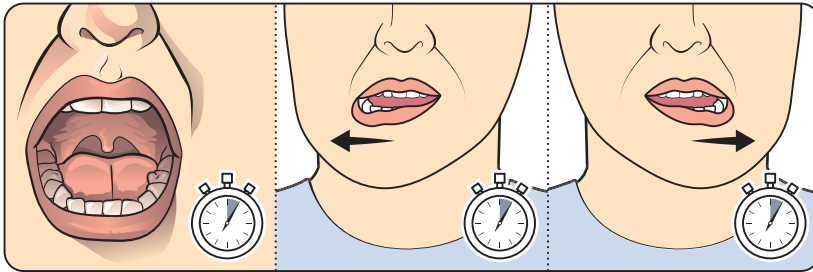
Stick out the tip of your tongue, hold it between your teeth or lips.

keeping your tongue in place, try to swallow your spit.

Rest and rinse if needed. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Exercise 3: Range of motion exercise

To stretch your jaw muscles



Open your mouth as big as you can. Hold for 5 seconds.

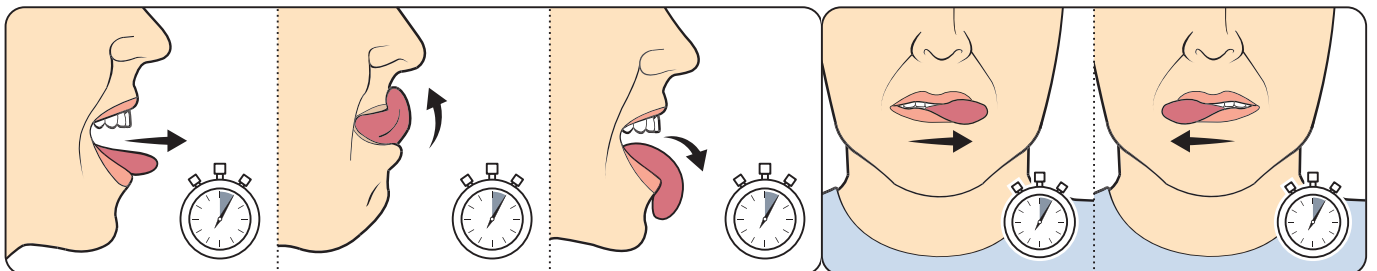
Move your jaw to the right. Hold for 5 seconds.

Move your jaw to the left. Hold for 5 seconds.

Rest and rinse if needed. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Exercise 4: Range of motion exercise

To stretch your tongue muscles



Stick your tongue out as far as it can go. Hold for 5 seconds.

Move your tongue up towards your nose. Hold for 5 seconds.

Move your tongue down towards your chin. Hold for 5 seconds.

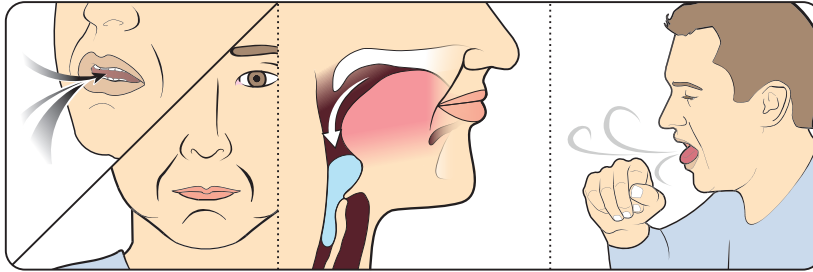
Move your tongue to the left side. Hold for 5 seconds.

Move your tongue to the right side. Hold for 5 seconds.

Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Exercise 5: The Supraglottic Swallow

To protect your airway



Take a breath
and hold it.

Swallow.

Then cough
out as strong
as possible.

Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Who can you ask for help with doing my exercises?

If you need help or have questions, ask a member of your health care team, such as your:

- Speech Language Pathologist
- Nurse
- Radiation Therapist
- Doctor (Oncologist)

Want to watch a video of these swallowing exercises?

Follow this link to watch a [video](#) about how to do these swallowing exercises.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZTXHwmOK6Q>

To learn more about the Head and Neck Cancer Survivorship Program and how to donate through the Head and Neck Discovery Fund, please go to: <https://thepmcf.ca/Our-Impact/Head-and-Neck-Discovery-Program>.



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