Swallowing Exercises

For patients with head and neck cancer receiving radiation treatment

Read this pamphlet to learn:
• How swallowing problems can affect your health
• How to do swallowing exercises that will help you eat, drink and heal during and after radiation treatment
• Signs that you may have swallowing problems

How does radiation to the head and neck cause swallowing problems?
Radiation treatment can cause scarring and hardening of the muscles in the mouth and throat. This causes swallowing problems.

Why is it important to avoid swallowing problems?
Swallowing problems can affect your ability to eat solid food, drink liquids or swallow your own saliva (spit). Eating and drinking well are important during and after your radiation treatment to help you heal. Swallowing problems can become life-long (chronic). They can also cause the following:
• Chest infection (pneumonia)
• Weight loss
• Dehydration (not having enough water in your body)
• Needing a feeding tube

What can I do to reduce my risk of having swallowing problems?
This pamphlet has 8 swallowing exercises will help you reduce swallowing problems, even if you require a feeding tube. It is important to continue to swallow through the course of your radiation treatment, even if it is just sips of water several times a day.

How to do your swallowing exercises
• Do each exercise 5-10 times in a row, every hour that you are awake
• Do these exercises before you start your treatment, during your treatment, and after your treatment is finished
• Do not have any food or drink in your mouth while doing these exercises
• You may feel very tired and be in pain during your radiation treatment, but try to continue with the exercises as best as you can. Your health care team is here to support you, so ask for help when you need it.
Remember to keep swallowing

- It is important to continue to swallow through the course of your radiation treatment, even if it is just sips of water several times a day.
- You may feel very tired and be in pain during your radiation treatment, but try to continue with the exercises as best as you can. Your health care team is here to support you, so ask for help when you need it.

Useful Tips:

1. Sit Upright.
2. Use a mirror.
3. Rinse and spit as needed.

How To Make Your Swallow Stronger

Repeat these exercises 5-10 times. Remember to keep your mouth wet!

1. Stick out the tip of your tongue. Hold it between your teeth or lips. Now, try to swallow your spit with your tongue in that position. Relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

2. Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth as hard as you can. With your mouth closed, swallow your spit (saliva) as hard as you can. Relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Try swallowing some water now

Take a small sip of water and swallow it. You may need to swallow it a few times to get it all down. Clear your throat or cough if you need to.
Keep The Muscles in your Mouth Moving

1. Open your mouth as big as you can. Hold for 5 seconds. Relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

2. Stick your tongue out as far as it can go. Hold for 5 seconds. Relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.


Try swallowing some water now

Take a small sip of water and swallow it. You may need to swallow it a few times to get it all down. Clear your throat or cough if you need to.
Practice Closing your Windpipe

Repeat these exercises 5-10 times.

**Note:** Do not do these exercises if you feel lightheaded or have heart problems. Also, do not do these exercises for one week after receiving a feeding tube. Please check with your nurse or doctor if you have concerns or questions about doing these exercises.

1. Hold your breath and put your hands together and push for 1 second. Then breathe out. Relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

2. Take a breath and hold it. Then cough out as strong as possible. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Who can I 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
- Radiation Therapist
- Nurse
- Doctor (Oncologist)

How do I know if I have a swallowing problem?

A swallowing problem can be any change in the way you swallow food, drink or your saliva (spit). Signs that you have a swallowing problem can include the following while eating or drinking:
- Coughing or throat clearing
- Needing extra liquid to wash down solid foods
- Liquid coming “back up” through your nose or mouth
- Extra swallows needed to clear a mouthful
- Needing more time to complete a meal
- A wet or gurgly sounding voice
- Food sticking in your throat
- Needing more effort to swallow
- Trouble chewing

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

References: The University of Texas, MD Anderson Cancer Center Swallowing Exercise Protocol, by Dr. Jan Lewin