

Swallowing Difficulty

After a spinal cord injury, it may be difficult for you to swallow safely. This can interfere with eating, drinking, and taking medication. When swallowing is hard to do, drinks and pills can go down the wrong way or get stuck. This can put you at risk of choking. If drinks or pills get into your lungs, it can also cause an infection. If you have a hard time swallowing, you may not eat or drink enough. If you are not eating or drinking enough, other health problems can follow.

Why is it hard to swallow?

When you have a spinal cord injury, damage to nerves can make your swallowing muscles weak. Your breathing can also be affected and makes eating and drinking hard. Swallowing problems can also happen after using a breathing tube or because of surgery. Tubes and surgery can cause your throat to swell. This can make it hard for your throat muscles to work the right way. This is very common when hardware is used to stabilize the spine.

Treat swallowing problems

If swallowing is difficult, your Speech therapist (SLP) may suggest foods and drinks that are safer for you. You might also change how you eat. Exercises can improve your swallowing muscles. In severe cases, a feeding tube might be the only option.

Changing what you eat: Some foods and drinks can go down easier and safer depending on why you are having trouble swallowing. Sometimes food needs to be pureed or chopped up and drinks need to be thickened.

Changing how you eat: To eat safely, you might need a new eating routine. Taking small bites and switching from food to drinks often can help. You might also need to swallow more often after each bite. Clearing your throat after each swallow can help make sure all the food goes down. Tilting your head can also help.

How can your caregiver help?

Even if your swallowing improves, you may still be at risk of choking or getting a lung infection. Having a weak cough can also put you at risk. In case of an emergency, it is good

Contact your Doctor or Nurse for more information.

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SCE2-Ge6-2017-01-27

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for family members and/or caregivers to know how they can help clear your throat. Examples include: assisted coughing, Heimlich Maneuver, and suctioning.

Other hints to help with swallowing

Eat when you are alert: Eat when you are wide awake. If you are feeling tired, there can be a higher risk of choking or having foods and liquids go down the wrong way.

Stay seated during and after a meal: Sitting up straight during meals makes it easier for you to swallow. After eating a meal, stay seated upright for at least 30 minutes. Sitting up uses gravity to make sure all food moves to your stomach.

Taking medications: Sit up straight when taking medications. Take a sip of water to wet your mouth and throat before taking pills. Always take one pill at a time. Follow each pill with a sip of water. If your pills can be crushed, try mixing them with applesauce or yogurt. Always check with your doctor before crushing a pill or mixing it.

Practice good oral hygiene: Keep your teeth and mouth clean by brushing at least twice a day and flossing at least once per day. See your dentist regularly. Good oral hygiene lowers the chance of building up germs in your mouth that can cause infections.

Treat acid reflux: Watch out for signs of acid reflux (heartburn). This happens when your stomach acid comes up into your throat. You will usually have a burning feeling in your chest or feel like food is coming into your throat. Acid reflux can irritate your throat and increase your risk of lung infection. If you think you are having signs of acid reflux, speak to your doctor.

Drink water: Drinking water during the day keeps you hydrated and your mouth moist. Limit your caffeine and alcohol intake since they can dehydrate you.

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