

Tips for Safe Eating, Drinking, and Taking Pills

After a spinal cord injury people can have “dysphagia”. This is when you have a hard time swallowing food, drinks, or pills safely. This can cause problems with your health. For example:

Choking: Food, drinks or pills go down the wrong way or get stuck in your throat. This can make it very hard to breath.

Aspiration pneumonia: This is a lung infection that happens when food, drinks, pills, phlegm, saliva or stomach acid goes down the wrong way into your windpipe instead of your stomach.

- If your cough is not strong enough the thing that went down the wrong way can go into your lungs (usually the bottom of your right lung).
- If it sits in your lung without being cleared with a cough it can cause lots of phlegm.
- You can have trouble breathing and start to get an infection with a high fever.

Dehydration or malnutrition: If your swallow is not strong enough to drink or eat it can lead to problems with your:

- Bladder
- Skin
- Muscles

Who is at risk for difficulty swallowing or “dysphagia”?

- People who have high cervical spine injury or disease. These injuries are known as “tetraplegia” or “quadriplegia”. People who have had an operation that put hardware in their spine could have more trouble swallowing.
- People who have had a change in their breathing and the strength of their breathing muscles.
- People who have a history of other medical conditions where extra bone grows on the front of their spine. These conditions are known as “cervical osteophytes” or “Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis” (also known as “DISH”)
- People who have conditions that affect their brain and nerves such as a “syrinx” (a pocket of fluid near the bottom of your brain), Parkinson’s disease, or Multiple Sclerosis,

Contact your Doctor or Nurse for more information.

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- People who have diseases or conditions affecting the throat or esophagus (the tube to your stomach) like cancer.
- People over 75 years of age

What to do if you are having swallowing problems?

A Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP) can:

- Help you find out what you can eat and drink safely and see if you need an X-Ray swallow test
- Give you exercises or a plan to help you be safe when eating, drinking, or taking pills
- Suggest other health care workers who can help you with the other health problems that can come with difficulty swallowing or “dysphagia”.

Things You Can Do Every Day to Be Safe When Eating, Drinking or Taking Pills

- Keep your mouth clean and healthy.
 - Brush your teeth and gums at least two times a day with a toothbrush.
 - Soak and brush your dentures.
 - See a dentist regularly. A clean mouth can lower the chance of getting an aspiration pneumonia and can make your mouth and throat more comfortable.
- Make sure you drink enough water during the day.
 - This can make your mouth and throat more comfortable and help dry foods and pills slide down a little easier.
- Limit caffeine.



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- Caffeine is in coffee, some teas and pop. Caffeine can make your mouth and throat feel dry. This dryness can affect how comfortable your mouth is and things will get stuck when you swallow. Caffeine can cause acid to come up from your stomach to your throat. If you are having trouble with stomach acid, speak with your doctor.



- Follow the Respiratory Therapist's (RT) recommendations for keeping your lungs healthy and as strong as possible.
- During meals:
 - Eat, drink or take pills when you are awake and breathing easily.
 - Make sure you are sitting up as much as possible. Bend at the hips. Your trunk should be straight.
 - Take small bites of food slowly and sip a drink in between mouthfuls of food.
 - After meals try to stay sitting up with your head and shoulders above your stomach for about 30 minutes. This can help your food stay in your stomach while you digest.
- Ask for an "assisted cough" if food, drinks or a pill is stuck or goes down the wrong way. People who are around you often should know how to do an "assisted cough".



If food, drinks, or a pill gets stuck or goes down the wrong way and the "assisted cough" doesn't work or you get a fever and have difficulty breathing call your doctor or 911 or go to your local emergency room. You may be getting an "aspiration pneumonia".

- To be as safe as possible when taking pills:
 - Sit up straight when taking pills even at nighttime.
 - Take one pill at a time
 - Take a sip of water to moisten your mouth and throat before taking a pill and take a sip of water between pills to help them travel down to your stomach

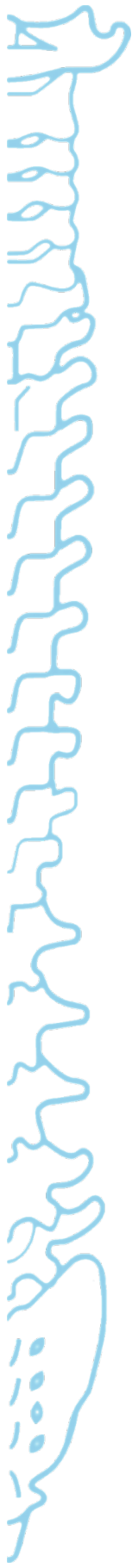
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- Mix pills with yoghurt, applesauce or oatmeal if it is too hard with a drink.
- Crush or open capsules if taking pills whole is too hard. Your doctor or pharmacist can tell you if your medication can be crushed.