

Difficulty swallowing, known as dysphagia (dis-fey-juh), impacts most individuals undergoing treatment for head and neck cancers. Difficulties with swallowing may be due to the presence of a tumor, surgical intervention, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy. Dysphagia may be temporary or persist as a chronic problem, and its severity may vary significantly among individuals. Ongoing dysphagia care is necessary to prevent pulmonary complications and to maintain adequate nutrition and hydration.

Appropriate evaluation and management of dysphagia requires the attention of a multidisciplinary team including physicians, speech-language pathologists and registered dieticians.

Signs and Symptoms of Swallowing Difficulties

- Coughing, choking, or throat clearing when eating or drinking
- Change in vocal quality during meals (wet sounding voice)
- Pain or discomfort when eating
- Feeling that food gets stuck in the throat
- Weight loss
- Nasal regurgitation of food or liquid during meals
- Fever
- Respiratory complications (i.e. pneumonia)

Evaluation of Swallowing Disorders

An evaluation of your swallowing function may be performed by a Speech Pathologist. To evaluate the safety and efficiency of your swallowing, the following tests may be ordered:

- **Dynamic Swallow Study (Videofluoroscopic Swallowing Study/Modified Barium Swallow Study):** A radiographic procedure that provides a direct and dynamic view of functions of the mouth, throat, and upper esophagus.
- **Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES):** An endoscopic procedure where a thin, flexible scope is passed through the nose to evaluate functions of the throat.

Swallowing Exercises

Performing swallowing exercises during and after intervention for head and neck cancers can help patients retain or restore their ability to swallow. Also, compliance with swallowing exercises allows for a faster return to a normal diet. It is important to continue swallowing throughout treatment to prevent loss of swallow function.

Your Speech Pathologist may prescribe some of the following swallowing exercises. For maximum benefit, swallowing exercises should be practiced ____ times per day, ____ per week.

Tongue hold exercise (Masako exercise) – REPEAT ____ TIMES

1. Put the tip of your tongue in between your teeth. If you cannot do this, put it against the front of the roof of your mouth. Stick your tongue out as far as you can.
2. Hold this position with your tongue and swallow. Try not to let your tongue tip slip back. Then, relax.

Effortful swallow exercise – REPEAT ____ TIMES

1. Swallow normally, but squeeze hard with your throat and tongue muscles.
2. Then, relax.

Mendelsohn swallow maneuver exercise – REPEAT ____ TIMES

1. Swallow normally; feel your voice box go up and down.
2. Swallow again. When you feel your voice box go up, squeeze hard and hold it up for 2 seconds. Then, relax.

Shaker exercise – REPEAT ____ TIMES

1. Lay flat on the floor or a bed.
2. Lift your head as if you are looking at your toes.
3. Hold your head in this position for 10 seconds. Increase the amount of time until you can hold it for 1 minute. Then, relax.