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## Swallowing Problems

When we eat and drink, food and liquids move from the mouth to the stomach through the esophagus (swallowing tube) through a process called swallowing. Cancer and cancer treatment can sometimes cause problems with swallowing. This is called **dysphagia** and can happen for many reasons.

- [What causes swallowing problems?](#)
- [Symptoms of swallowing problems](#)
- [Treatment for swallowing problems](#)
- [Talking with your cancer care team](#)
- [Go to the emergency room or call 911 if you](#)

### What causes swallowing problems?

Swallowing problems can affect a person's quality of life. Not being able to eat or drink enough can cause weight loss and weakness. Trouble swallowing can also make it more likely that a person will get food or liquids into their lungs (aspiration). This can lead to infection and breathing problems.

Swallowing problems can happen when something changes the normal process of swallowing. This can come from damage to the mouth, tongue, or esophagus, or when swallowing becomes painful.

Common causes of swallowing problems are:

- Head and neck cancer
- Cancer treatments, such as radiation therapy or surgery to the mouth, jaw, throat, or esophagus
- Mouth sores



If mouth pain is a problem, you may have [mouth sores](#)<sup>3</sup> (mucositis). Talk to your cancer care team about how to best manage this pain.

## Swallowing therapy

Your cancer care team may suggest that you work with a speech pathologist. Many speech pathologists have special training to help people with swallowing problems. They can help you learn how to swallow better and avoid choking and gagging.

## Eating and drinking

Eating and drinking when you have swallowing problems can be hard. Your cancer care team might want you to work with a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) or registered dietitian (RD).

They will work with you to figure out the best way to help you get the food and liquids you need to keep you from losing too much weight.

The RDN or RD will talk with you about what you are able to eat and drink and if you have lost weight. They might want you to change how you currently get food and fluids and suggest things like:

- Nutritional supplement drinks or other products (such as Ensure, Boost, etc)
- A feeding tube

- added thickeners), because they're easier to swallow than thin liquids.
- Sit upright to eat and drink and stay that way for a few minutes after meals.
  - Choose foods high in calories and protein if you are losing weight. This includes eggs, milkshakes, casseroles, and nutritional shakes.
  - Mash or puree foods (such as meats, cereals, and fresh fruits) so that they're soft like baby food. You might need to add liquids to dry foods before blending.
  - Dip breads in milk to soften.
  - Refrigerate food (the cold helps numb pain) or serve cool or lukewarm. If cold foods make the pain worse, try them at room temperature.
  - Try meal replacement or nutritional supplement beverages.

Stay away from:

- Foods that need a lot of chewing.
- Hard, dry foods such as crackers, pretzels, nuts, and chips.
- Alcohol and hot, spicy foods or liquids.
- Acidic foods, such as citrus fruits and drinks and fizzy soft drinks.

To make foods and liquids easier to swallow, try these tips

- Use gelatin to help soften cakes, cookies, crackers, sandwiches, pureed fruits, and other cold food. Mix 1 tablespoon gelatin in 2 cups hot liquid until dissolved; pour over food. Let food sit until soaked through.
- Tapioca, flour, and cornstarch can thicken liquids. These **must be cooked** before using.
- Use commercial thickeners to adjust how thick the liquid is.
- Use pureed vegetables and instant potatoes in soups. These can change the food's flavor.
- Use baby rice cereal to make a very thick product.
- If thick liquids are recommended for you, try buttermilk, eggnog, milk shakes, yogurt shakes, and ice cream.

## Talking with your cancer care team

Let your cancer care team know if you have any of the following symptoms that might mean you have swallowing problems.

- Gagging, coughing, or choking more than usual, especially while eating or drinking
- Problems with food “sticking” as it goes down
- Can’t swallow your medicines
- Severe sore throat
- Red, shiny mouth or sores in your mouth or on your tongue
- Chest congestion
- Not able to keep any food or fluids down for more than 24 hours

### **Go to the emergency room or call 911 if you**

- Are having trouble breathing
- Have a new or worsening fever
- Are feeling weak or dizzy

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