

Swallowing exercises: A guide for patients with head and neck cancer

This leaflet is for patients who have treatment for head and neck cancer and who are experiencing swallowing difficulties. It gives some rehabilitation exercises to help with eating and drinking. Exercises should only be used by the individual named below and under guidance from your Speech and Language Therapist.

Patient name: _____

Why do I need to do swallowing exercises?

Radiotherapy to the head and neck can cause both short and long-term difficulties with swallowing; this is known as dysphagia. Dysphagia can make it difficult to eat, drink and take your medication and you may be at risk of food, fluids or saliva 'going down the wrong way'. If this happens it can result in choking and/or chest infections known as 'aspiration pneumonia'.

There is evidence that carrying out swallowing exercises can help to prevent/minimise the effects of surgery and chemotherapy/radiotherapy on swallowing. Further research is needed however, in order to establish what the best exercise regime is.

The exercises

The below exercises should be completed 5 x daily. You should feel effort, but STOP if you experience any pain.

Please raise any concerns you have with the Speech and Language Therapist who will be in regular contact with you throughout your treatment. Alternatively, you can contact another member of the Head & Neck Multidisciplinary Team, including the clinical nurse specialists.

Contact details:

Speech and Language Therapy Department – 0118 322 5205

1. Jaw exercises:

- A) Open your mouth as wide as you can in an exaggerated yawn.
 - Hold this for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
- B) Open your mouth as wide as you can, then move the jaw to the left.
 - Hold for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
- C) Open your mouth as wide as you can, then move the jaw to the left.
 - Hold for 3 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
 - HINT: use a mirror to make sure you are moving your jaw only and not your head.

2. Lip / cheek exercises:

- A) Keeping your lips held tightly together make an exaggerated smile.
 - Hold for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
- B) Do the same, but this time when smiling open your mouth wide, keeping your teeth hidden under your lips.
 - Hold for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
- C) Repeat “eey ooh, eey ooh” being sure to exaggerate the movements as much as possible and holding each one for a second or two.
 - Repeat x 5.

3. Tongue exercises:

- A) Put your tongue out as far as it will go keeping it straight.
 - Hold for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
- B) Put your tongue out and move it to the left.
 - Hold for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.
- C) Put your tongue out and move it to the right.
 - Hold for 5 seconds.
 - Repeat x 5.

4. Tongue base exercises

- A) Effortful swallow - swallow hard trying to squeeze the muscles in the throat as if you are trying to swallow a large piece of meat.
 - Repeat x 5.
 - HINT: Sip water between each repetition to keep your mouth moist.

- B) HAWK - Say the word “HAWK” as powerfully as possible – feel how the back of the tongue raises on the “k”.
- Try and get strong contact between your tongue and the roof of the mouth on “k” pushing your tongue hard upwards.
 - Repeat x 5.
- C) Masako - Put your tongue out and hold it between your teeth. Swallow strongly keeping your tongue held between your teeth.
- Repeat x 5.
 - HINT: Sip water between each repetition to keep your mouth moist.

5. Voice box ‘larynx’ exercises:

- A) Glide on an ‘eeey’ sound (as in “Key”) from a low pitch to a high pitch, holding this high pitch for 3-5 seconds or shorter if you cannot manage longer.
- Repeat x 5.
 - HINT: Be sure not to strain and do this slowly and gently.
- B) Glide from a high pitch ‘eeey’ to a low pitch holding for 3-5 seconds.
- Repeat x 5.

Further information

The Christie NHS Foundation Trust have some very useful videos showing how to do some of these exercises on their website – ask your speech and language therapist for advice if you are not sure what exercises are suitable. www.christie.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/living-with-and-beyond-cancer/rehabilitation-services-for-patients/speech-and-language-therapy/exercise-videos/

More information is available on the Trust website: www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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