

Swallowing problems resulting from chemotherapy and / or radiotherapy to the head and neck

An information guide



Swallowing problems resulting from chemotherapy and / or radiotherapy to the head and neck

What is dysphagia?

- Dysphagia is a problem with swallowing food and/or drinks
- Surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy can all make it difficult for the muscles of the tongue, throat and voice box to work properly. This can lead to swallowing difficulties.

How could my swallowing be affected by these treatments?

There are several side effects of chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy to the head and neck, which may affect your swallowing:

- Dry mouth
- Sticky, thick saliva
- Infections and/or ulcers of your mouth and throat
- Soreness and pain
- Stiffness of the muscles in the mouth and throat, including the jaw
- Swelling of the lining of the mouth and throat
- Taste changes, or complete loss of taste
- Fatigue
- Lack of appetite
- Increased secretions in the throat that are difficult to clear
- Frequent throat clearing
- Wet, gurgly sounding voice
- Food or drink going down "the wrong way" resulting in coughing when eating or drinking. This may mean that your swallow has become 'unsafe'. This can lead to the development of a chest infection, with signs such as a change in temperature or bringing up green phlegm.
- If at any point during or after treatment your swallow becomes unsafe or you are unable to swallow, a temporary feeding tube

may need to be inserted in your nose which goes down to your stomach called a nasogastric tube (NG tube).

What can I do to help?

Whilst you are undergoing chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy to your head and neck, you may need to eat softer, moister foods in smaller portions. The Speech and Language Therapist and Dietitian will jointly advise you on this. The Dietitian may also advise you to take nutritional supplements to help with your diet if solid foods become difficult to swallow.

When are these difficulties likely to occur?

- Some people have swallowing problems before their treatment starts. If this is the case please ask to see the Speech and Language Therapist before your treatment
- Most people begin to experience some or all of these side effects about halfway through their chemotherapy/radiotherapy treatment. Some effects may last several weeks after completion of treatment; however some symptoms or problems such as dry mouth may be longer lasting or even permanent.
- If at any point during or after your treatment you are having swallowing difficulties, or any of the problems mentioned above, please contact your Speech and Language therapist, or ask your doctor or key worker to do this for you, so that they can arrange for an early assessment/advice.

The Speech and Language Therapist may:

- Assess your swallowing of food and drink
- Give you exercises aimed at improving or strengthening your swallow
- Advise you of ways to help you eat and drink more easily/safely
- Advise you which diet/fluid consistencies are the safest for you

Please contact:

Name:

Telephone number:

If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service

Jeśli angielski nie jest twoim pierwszym językiem i potrzebujesz pomocy, skontaktuj się z działem tłumaczeń ustnych i pisemnych

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