



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 these exercises?

Radiotherapy to the head and neck can cause 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'.
The below exercises may help to improve your swallowing.

The exercises

You should feel effort when doing these exercises, but STOP if you experience any pain. Please raise any concerns you have with the speech and language therapist or treatment team who will be in regular contact with you throughout the treatment.
Please complete the whole routine _____ per day.

Contact details:

Speech and Language Therapy Department – 0118 322 5205 / 07901 224017.
Email: rbft.headandnecksalt@nhs.net

1. Jaw exercises:

- A) Open your mouth wide in a comfortable stretch like a yawn.
 - Hold this position for 5-7 seconds.
 - Repeat x 10.
- B) Let your jaw hang loose, then move the jaw all the way to your left.
 - Hold this position for 5-7 seconds.
 - Repeat x 10.

- C) Let your jaw hang loose, then move the jaw all the way to your right.
- Hold this position for 5-7 seconds.
 - Repeat x 10.
 - HINT: use a mirror to make sure you are moving only jaw and not your head.

2. Tongue exercises:

- A) Put your tongue out as far as it will go, keeping it straight.
- Hold this for 5-7 seconds.
 - Repeat x 10.
- B) Push your tongue out and then move it all the way to your left. Hint – use a mirror and ensure you keep your jaw still and only move your tongue during the exercise.
- Hold this for 5-7 seconds.
 - Repeat x 10.
- C) Push your tongue out and then move it all the way to your right.
- Hold this for 5-7 seconds.
 - Repeat x 10.

3. Tongue base exercises

- A) Effortful swallow – swallow your saliva hard trying to squeeze the muscles in the throat as if you are swallowing an egg.
- Repeat x 10.
 - 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 rises 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 10.
- C) Masako – Hold your tongue between your teeth. Swallow strongly keeping your tongue held in this position
- Repeat x 10.
 - HINT: Sip water between each repetition to keep your mouth moist.

Further information

The Christie NHS Foundation Trust have some very useful videos on their website, showing how to do some of these exercises – ask your speech and language therapist for advice if you are not sure what exercises are suitable. Visit <https://www.christie.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/services/rehabilitation-department-physiotherapy-and-occupational-therapy/what-we-do/speech-and-language-therapy/speech-and-language-therapy-exercise-videos>

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Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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