

Department of speech and language therapy

# Chemo-radiotherapy to the head and neck: swallowing difficulties

Swallowing difficulties are common after chemo-radiotherapy to the head and neck, as movements to the structures essential for swallowing, such as the tongue and larynx (voice box), may be impaired. You may have had difficulties with swallowing before your treatment started, especially if you have had surgery. Most people, however, find that they start to experience some side effects from approximately half way through their radiotherapy. These can include:

- dry mouth
- thick, sticky saliva
- changes in taste
- infections/ulcers of the mouth and throat
- swelling
- discomfort/pain on swallowing
- stiffness of the muscles in the mouth and throat
- hoarse voice
- food or drink 'going down the wrong way'
- weight loss
- nausea.

Typically these side effects begin to reduce around four weeks after your treatment has finished, but difficulties may last longer. In some cases swallowing difficulties can be permanent.

If your swallowing becomes very difficult you might not be able to manage to eat and drink an adequate amount of food and drink. In this case you may need tube feeding, either via the nose (an NG tube) or through the stomach (gastrostomy).

## The role of the speech and language therapist

A speech and language therapist specialises in disorders of speech, voice and swallowing and can help you at any point of your treatment pathway. At the beginning of your treatment we provide information and support regarding any difficulties you may encounter with eating or drinking or your jaw. We also carry out swallowing assessments to recommend the safest ways to continue with your oral intake.

Your speech and language therapist can give you general exercises for the tongue, jaw and larynx. We advise keeping your swallowing active for as long as possible and studies have shown that intensive daily exercising throughout radiotherapy can help you eat for longer and lose less weight during your



treatment. It is normal though, that you may reach a point when it is too sore to exercise, so we recommend you resume exercising and swallowing when it is comfortable to do so.

If needed, when the acute phase of your treatment is over, we can undertake a detailed assessment of your swallowing to guide you on specific, targeted exercises to aid your recovery.

We may recommend that you carry out the swallowing exercises for a longer period of time to prevent problems arising in the future.

If you would like any advice or support during your treatment about any speech, voice, mouth opening or swallowing difficulties, then you can contact the Speech and Language Therapy department on **0161 446 8046**.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

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For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



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urgent support and specialist advice  
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