

Department of speech and language therapy

# Swallowing problems (dysphagia) from radiotherapy or chemoradiotherapy

## What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia refers to difficulty swallowing food and/or drinks. Dysphagia can occur during or after radiotherapy to the head and neck as this treatment can make the swallowing muscles weak or stiff.

## Side effects that may affect your swallowing

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

- Dry mouth.
- Sticky, thick saliva.
- Infections and/or ulcers of your mouth and throat (mucositis).
- Soreness and pain.
- Stiffness of the muscles in the mouth and throat, including the jaw.
- Swelling/inflammation of the lining of the mouth and throat.
- Taste changes, or complete loss of taste.
- Fatigue.
- Lack of appetite.
- Increased secretions in the throat which are difficult to clear.

## Signs of dysphagia to look out for

- Coughing when eating or drinking.
- Frequent throat clearing.
- Wet, gurgly sounding voice.
- Food sticking in your throat.
- Liquids coming back up through your nose or mouth.
- Feeling of food and/or drink going down 'the wrong way'.

## What does this mean?

This may mean that your swallow has become uncoordinated which can lead to food or drink getting stuck in the throat or entering the lungs. This may lead to a chest infection with symptoms such as a change in temperature or bringing up green phlegm.

If at any point during or after treatment your swallowing becomes uncoordinated or you are unable to eat or drink properly, a temporary feeding tube may need to be inserted in your nose which goes down to your stomach and is called a nasogastric tube (NG tube).



## What can I do to help?

Whilst you are undergoing radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy to your head and neck you may need to eat softer, more moist 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 supplement drinks to help with your diet if solid foods become difficult to swallow. The speech and language therapist will also assess your swallowing during your treatment to monitor for any difficulties.

You will have been provided with exercises for your swallowing muscles before you started your treatment. It is important to do these as often as you can to keep your swallowing muscles moving and strong during your treatment.

## 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 radiotherapy/chemotherapy treatment.
- Some effects may last several weeks after completion of treatment; however some symptoms such as dry mouth may be longer lasting or may even be permanent.

If at any point during or after your

treatment you are having swallowing difficulties, or any of the side effects 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.

## What will the speech and language therapist do?

- 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.

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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