

Department of speech and language therapy

Swallowing exercises for patients receiving radiotherapy to the head and neck

What is normal swallowing?

Swallowing is a process that involves co-ordinating several structures and muscles in your head and neck. It transports food and drink from the mouth into the stomach.

How is swallowing affected by radiotherapy treatment?

Most people will experience some side effects during the course of treatment. The tissues in the area being treated become sore and inflamed, and it may become very painful to swallow. For some people, this affects the timing and co-ordination of the swallow process which will lead to difficulties with eating and drinking.

Why swallowing exercises?

These exercises target specific groups of muscles in the neck and throat which are involved in swallowing. It has been shown that regular practice of these exercises strengthens the swallowing muscles. This can help you to continue eating and drinking for longer during radiotherapy and improves the likelihood of a better functional swallow after treatment.

When to do the swallowing exercises

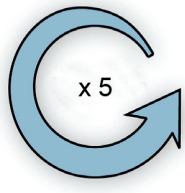
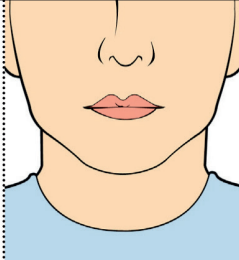


- Do these sets of exercises 5 times a day.
- Do these exercises before you start treatment, during your treatment, and after your treatment has finished.
- Do not have any food or drink in your mouth whilst doing these exercises.
- You may feel very tired and be in pain during your radiation treatment, but try to continue with your exercises as best you can.



Tongue exercises

• Tongue protrusion forward

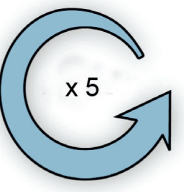
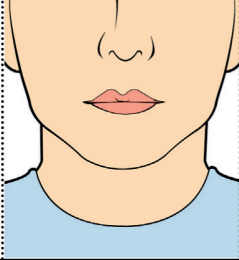

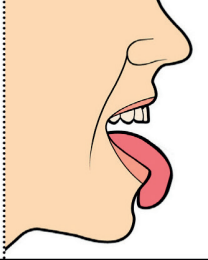


1



Stick your tongue out as far as it can go Hold for 5 seconds Relax Repeat 5 times

• Tongue protrusion up and down

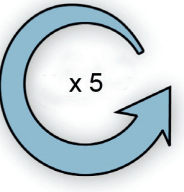
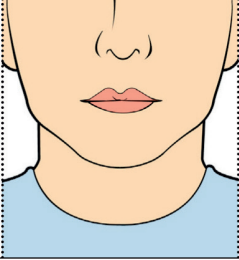



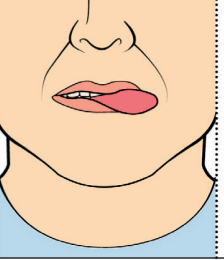
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Move your tongue up towards your nose Hold for 5 seconds Now move your tongue down towards your chin Hold for 5 seconds Relax Repeat 5 times

• Tongue protrusion side to side

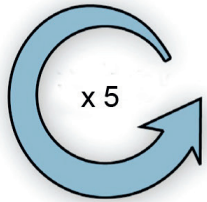
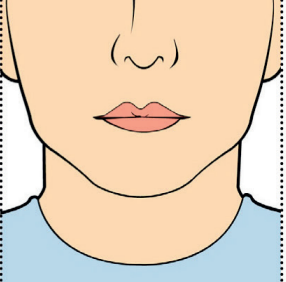
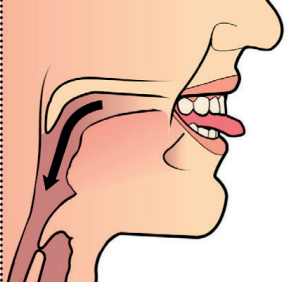
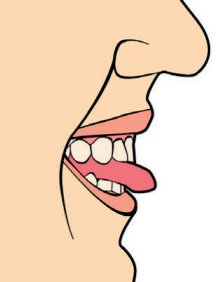
3



Move your tongue to the left side Hold for 5 seconds Now move your tongue to the right side Hold for 5 seconds Relax Repeat 5 times

• Masako technique

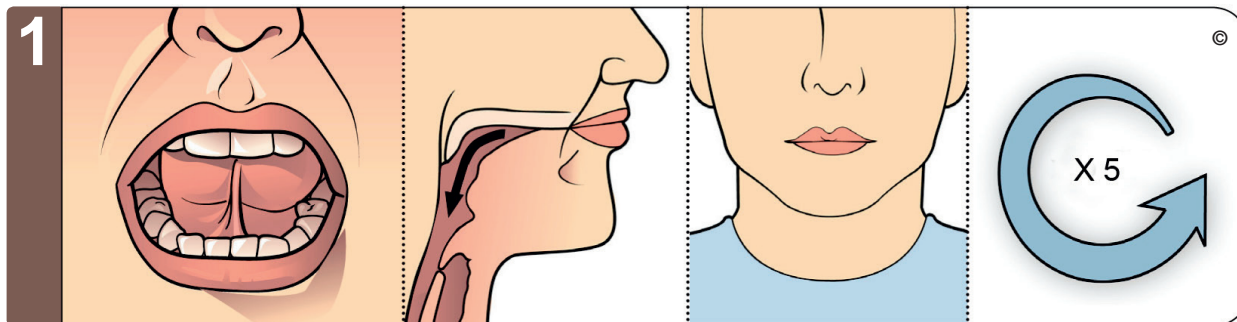
4



Stick out the tip of your tongue. Hold it gently between your teeth. Keeping your tongue held in place, try to swallow. Relax Repeat 5 times

Exercises to strengthen the swallowing muscles

• Tongue Press



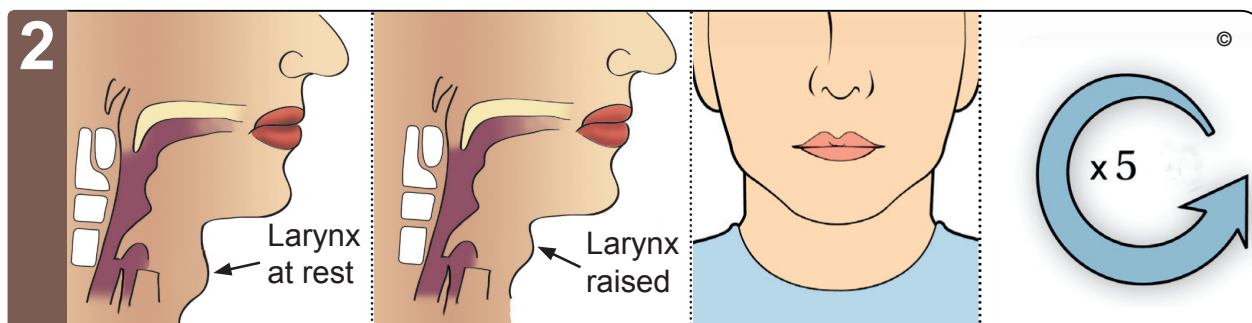
Press your tongue against the roof your mouth as hard as you can

With your mouth closed, swallow as hard as you can. Feel the tongue push against the roof of your mouth.

Relax

Repeat 5 times

• Mendelsohn manoeuvre



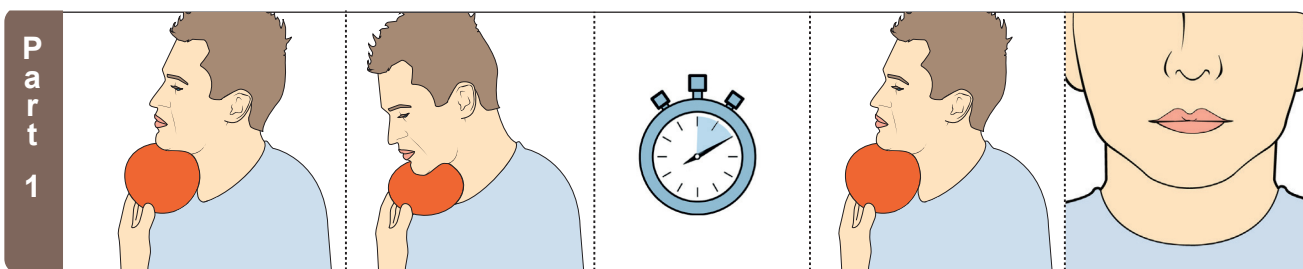
Swallow your saliva a couple of times and pay attention to your neck as you swallow.

Feel your larynx (voice-box) lift during the swallow. On the next swallow, keep it lifted with your neck muscles for several seconds.

Relax

Repeat 5 times

• Chin tuck against resistance



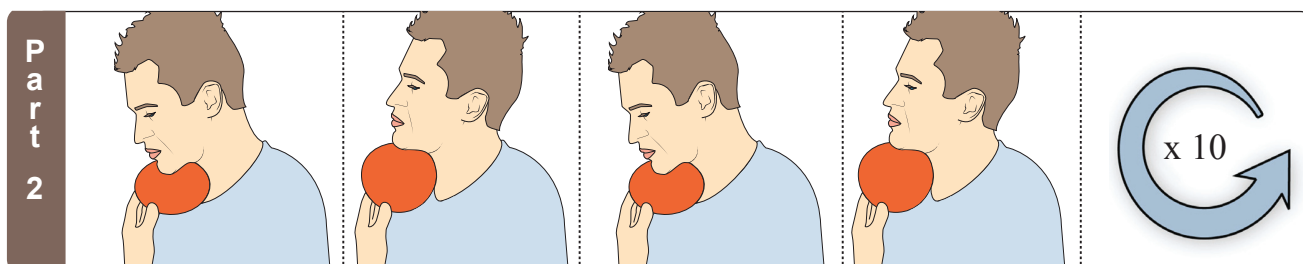
Place the rubber ball between the chin and bottom of your neck

Squeeze the ball as hard as you can

Hold this position for 10 seconds

Return to resting position

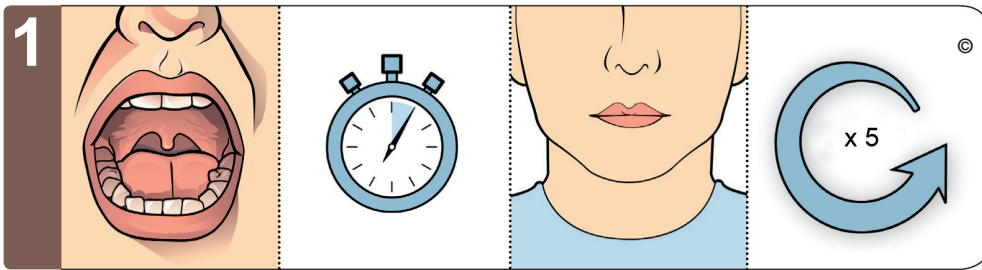
Repeat this two more times



Hold the ball between the chin and the bottom of your neck, squeeze the ball as hard as you can. Lift your head back up, holding the ball in place. Do this in quick succession.

Repeat this 10 times

Jaw opening



Open your mouth as widely as you can

Hold for 5 seconds

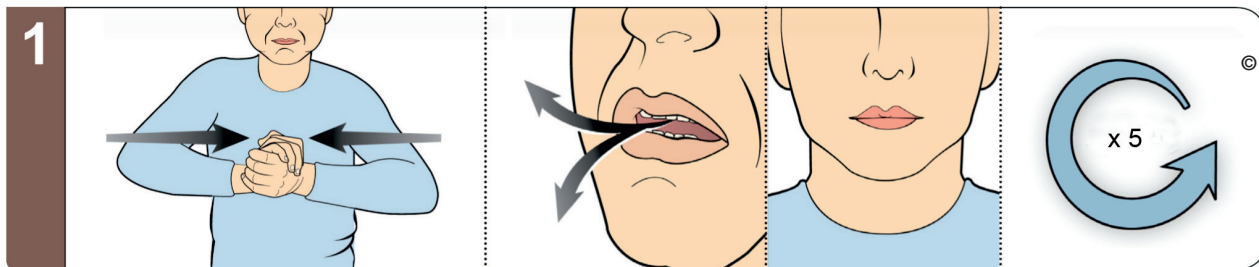
Relax

Repeat 5 times



Note: Do not do the following exercises if you feel light headed or have heart problems. Also, do not do these exercises for one week after receiving a feeding tube. Please check with your nurse or doctor if you have concerns or questions about doing these exercises

• Breath hold



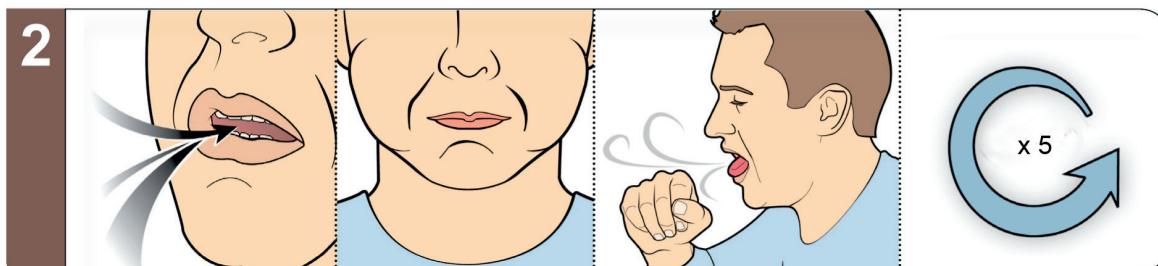
Take a breath in, hold it, press your palms together for 1 second

Then breathe out

Relax

Repeat 5 times

• Purposeful cough



Take a breath in, hold it.

Then cough out as hard as possible

Repeat 5 times

How do I know if I have a swallowing problem?

Swallowing problems may develop over the course of your radiotherapy treatment. These following signs are not uncommon:

- A tickly cough every time, after you swallow (especially fluids)
- A wet/gurgly sounding voice
- Food sticking in your throat
- Needing extra swallows and/or liquids to clear a mouthful of food
- Liquids coming back up through your nose or mouth

If you notice any of these signs, please remember to let your team know (this can include the clinical nurse specialist, doctor or speech therapist) as soon as possible.

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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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