

Difficulty Chewing and Swallowing

Online version with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/chewingandswallowing>

Chewing and Swallowing Issues

Sometimes cancer, surgery or chemotherapy can cause swallowing problems such as trouble passing food or liquid down the throat.

Difficulty chewing often results from changes to the mouth, jaw, or tongue. Many patients benefit from starting chewing and or swallowing therapy before cancer treatment, especially those with cancer in the throat.

Both speech and physical therapy may be able to help. Speech pathologists specialize in helping people use muscles in the mouth and throat used for chewing. Physical therapists specialize in helping patients with jaw exercises and local treatments, such as heat/cold therapy or massage.

Content adapted from websites below.

Some people, especially have throat surgery, may cough or choke when trying to swallow. Others may feel like food is stuck in their throat. Talk to your cancer care team for help if needed.

Tips you can try yourself:

- Liquids may be the best tolerated, consider drinking meal replacement or nutritional supplement beverages.
- Eat soft, smooth foods, such as full fat yogurt or high protein pudding.
- Mash or blend foods, try softer versions of your favorite fruits or vegetables such as applesauce, pureed carrots, bananas, or peas.
- Moisten dry foods with broth, sauce, butter, oil or whole milk.
- Cut food into small bites, chew solid foods thoroughly and eat at a slowed pace
- Try thickening liquids. Add gelatin, tapioca, baby rice cereal, or commercial thickening products.
- Try a straw to drink liquids and soft foods though this can sometimes prove more difficult.
- Eat cold or room-temperature foods to reduce sensitivity.
- Take sips of water or other liquids while eating. This keeps the mouth and food moist.
- Sit upright when eating or drinking.
- Eat small, frequent meals.
- If you are losing weight, choose foods high in calories and protein, such as eggs, full fat yogurt, whole milk shakes or nutritional shakes
- Avoid dry, coarse, or hard foods or foods that need a lot of chewing.

Medical considerations and therapy may consist of:

- **Dental and oral health care:** Dentists can help manage potential dental and oral side effects from treatment. For example, radiation therapy may increase risk of tooth decay or gum disease.
- **Medication:** Your doctor may prescribe medicine if you have pain chewing or swallowing. Some medicines reduce pain and inflammation. Other medications may treat mouth or throat infections. Some medicines come as mouth rinses used before eating.
- **Feeding tube:** Sometimes, swallowing problems make it hard to eat a healthy diet. Your doctors may discuss the placement of a tube through the nose into the stomach or placed through abdomen into the stomach.

Resources for Additional Information:

- [NCCN, Understanding the Oral Complications - From Cancer Treatment](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Difficulty Swallowing or Dysphagia](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Difficulty Chewing](#)
- [American Cancer Society, Swallowing Problem](#)
- [NIH, Chemotherapy and Your Mouth](#)

Recursos en Español:

- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Problemas en la boca y en la garganta](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Dificultad para tragar o disfagia](#)
- [Chemocare, Consejos para controlar los problemas de alimentación y su dieta después de los tratamientos de quimioterapia](#)
- [American Cancer Society, Problemas de deglución \(tragar alimento\)](#)