



Safe Swallowing Tips

How to avoid aspiration and choking

This handout gives tips to help lower your risk of aspiration and choking. Your speech pathologist will check the tips that will be most helpful for you.

The tips checked below will lower your risk for *aspiration* (getting food or liquid in your lungs) and choking:

☐ **Special swallowing strategies:** _____

- ☐ **Concentrate.** Always eat slowly and carefully. Focus only on eating, and do not watch TV or have a conversation while you are eating.
- ☐ **Sit upright.** Do not eat while you are leaning back or lying down.
- ☐ **Take small bites of food and small sips of liquid.** Use a teaspoon or small plastic spoon for solid foods. If you use a straw, take one sip at a time. If you use a cup, take a small sip and tilt your chin slightly down before swallowing. Do **not** tilt your head back.
- ☐ **Do not use straws.**
- ☐ **Take one sip of liquid at a time.** Taking in larger amounts, one swallow after another, can increase your risk of aspiration.
- ☐ **Keep your chin down.** Tilt your chin down and keep it down as you swallow. This posture may make swallowing easier and will lower the chance of food or drink going into your windpipe.
- ☐ **Think “swallow.”** Hold the food or drink in your mouth and think about swallowing, then swallow.
- ☐ **Take one bite of food at a time.** Be sure you swallow all the food in your mouth before putting in more. Bits of food can collect in your mouth and cause choking later.

- ☐ **Clear your throat.** After you swallow, gently clear your throat and swallow again.
- ☐ **Double or triple swallow.** With each bite or sip, swallow 2 to 3 times before taking the next bite or sip.
- ☐ **Slow your rate.** Take your time to eat a meal. It may help to put down your spoon or fork between bites, or put down your cup between sips.
- ☐ **Alternate solids and liquids.** Take a bite of food, chew it well, and swallow it. Then take a sip of liquid and swallow. Repeat.
- ☐ **Add extra sauces, gravies, and condiments to foods,** especially foods that are dry.
- ☐ **Avoid mixing food textures,** such as chicken noodle soup with thin broth or dry cereal with milk. Or, separate solids and liquids – for instance, take a spoonful of **only** broth OR noodles.
- ☐ **Place the food in the back of your mouth.** If moving food to the back of your mouth is hard, put the food as far back on your tongue as possible. If the muscles on one side of your face are weak, place the food on the stronger side of your tongue. If your lip muscles are weak and food leaks out of your mouth, try pinching your lips together with your fingers.
- ☐ **Turn your head.** If you have weakness on one side of your face, place the food in your mouth on the stronger side for chewing, and move it back to swallow. Turn your head toward the stronger side when you swallow.
- ☐ **Remain upright.** It is a good idea to sit upright for at least 20 to 30 minutes after eating. That way, if pieces of food stay in your mouth or in the back of your throat, they will slide down your *esophagus* (the tube that carries food to your stomach), rather than falling into your windpipe later.
- ☐ **When choking, cough.** If you start to choke on a piece of food, do **not** try to wash it down with liquid or pick it out with your fingers. Try to cough up the piece of food. If you cannot cough, use the *Heimlich maneuver*, a technique used in emergencies to dislodge food from the windpipe. Use the Heimlich maneuver **only** if you cannot cough.
- ☐ **Be sure to clean your mouth thoroughly,** especially after meals. This may include rinsing with water, gargling with mouthwash, or brushing your teeth. Leftover liquid or tiny pieces of food can cause problems if they are aspirated (swallowed into your airway). They may also allow bacteria (germs) to grow.

Questions?

Your questions are important. If you have questions, please contact your Speech Pathologist:

Diet Changes to Make Swallowing Easier

- ☐ **Textures.** _____
- ☐ **Avoid certain foods.** Avoid foods that are hard or have tough skins, such as raw apples. These types of food are hard to chew and swallow. Also, avoid foods that fall apart in your mouth, such as seeds, muffins, and nuts. And, avoid dry, sticky foods such as mashed potatoes without gravy, white bread, and peanut butter.
- ☐ **Thick saliva.** If thick saliva in your mouth is a problem, avoid milk and chocolate products. These foods cause thicker saliva in some people.
- ☐ **Make sure you get the right nutrition for your needs.** Talk with a dietitian about a diet that will meet your nutritional needs. If eating takes a lot of your time and energy, avoid empty calories (foods with little or no nutritional value).
- ☐ **Eat often.** Eating 6 small meals instead of 3 large meals can keep you from getting tired while you eat. Make the most of the time you spend eating by eating nutritious foods, not empty calories. It is better to spend time and energy drinking a milkshake or eggnog rather than spending the same amount of time and energy drinking coffee or tea.
- ☐ **Drink at least 2 quarts (eight 8-ounce glasses) of liquid every day.** This includes all liquids, not just water.
- ☐ **Drink liquids that are either hot or cold.** Avoid liquids that are room temperature.
- ☐ **Avoid caffeine.** Drink only beverages without caffeine, such as decaffeinated coffee, tea, or pop.

Tips for Swallowing Pills and Capsules

- ☐ **When you swallow pills or capsules, place them at the back of your tongue with your fingers.** Then, drink some liquid, tilt your head down slightly, and swallow.
- ☐ **If it is hard for you to swallow medicines with water, try one of these tips:**
 - Ask your pharmacist if it is OK to crush the pills you take. If it is, crush them and mix well with pureed food. Or empty capsules into pureed food and mix well.
 - Completely cover the pill or capsule in a spoonful of soft food such as applesauce or pudding, then swallow.

UW Medicine

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
MEDICAL CENTER

Speech Pathology Services

Box 356154

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195
206-598-4852

© University of Washington Medical Center
Clinician Review/Published: 11/2011

Reprints on Health Online: <http://healthonline.washington.edu>