Swallowing

Some types of cancer can cause problems with swallowing. For example, cancers of the gullet (oesophagus) or head and neck may make swallowing hard.

Cancer treatments may also cause problems. Some chemotherapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy drugs can affect the cells in the lining of the throat. Radiotherapy for head or neck cancer can have the same effect. This can make it painful to chew or swallow.

An infection in your mouth or throat, such as thrush, can also make chewing and swallowing uncomfortable. Swallowing problems caused by treatment are usually temporary, but they can sometimes be permanent.

Tell your doctor or dietitian if you have any difficulties chewing or swallowing. If you find that drinks make you cough, and you are feeling unwell, you should tell your doctor or nurse as soon as possible. A speech and language therapist (SLT) can advise you about problems with swallowing.

If you have oesophageal or head and neck cancer, you may see a speech and language therapist (SLT) and a dietitian before your treatment starts. A dietitian can help you prepare for treatment and manage any weight loss. Your SLT can tell you about the effects treatment is likely to have. They will talk to you about what can help.

If your doctor thinks it may become difficult for you to eat enough by mouth they may suggest being fed through a tube for a while. This makes sure you get enough calories to keep up or gain weight. When your swallowing improves, and you can eat more through your mouth, the tube can be removed.

Tips for managing swallowing problems

- Taking painkillers 30 minutes before meals may help you chew and swallow more easily. Your doctor or nurse can suggest which painkillers might be best for you to take.
- Choose foods that are easy to swallow, such as scrambled eggs, scrambled tofu or yoghurt.
- Soften foods with sauces and gravy.
- Finely chop meat and vegetables and cook them for a long time. For example, you could make a stew or casserole.
- Cut the crusts off bread to make softer sandwiches. Some people find thin bread easier to swallow.
- If you have a blender, you could liquidise cooked foods.
- Some frozen-meal, home-delivery companies have a soft-food range on their menu.

There are several food supplements that you may find helpful, for example Complan® or Meritene® drinks. Your dietitian can provide nutritional advice and prescribe supplements if needed.

You can buy these from your chemist or supermarket. Your doctor may give you a prescription for some of them. Always talk to your doctor or dietitian before taking supplements. They can explain which food supplements might be best for you.

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Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our website, including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on be.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- Eating problems and cancer
- Side effects from chemotherapy – easy read
- Side effects from radiotherapy – easy read
- Understanding oesophageal cancer
- Understanding head and neck cancers

We produce information in a range of formats and languages. To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk where you can chat to us online.

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our Online Community.

Other useful contact details

- Boots Macmillan Information Pharmacists - for free support visit www.boots.com/health-pharmacy-advice/macmillan or ask in store.

Notes and questions

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