

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. Treatment for these cancers may also cause problems. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments can affect the cells in the lining of the throat. This can make it painful to chew or swallow. Treatment can also increase your risk of getting an infection in your mouth or throat, such as thrush. This can make chewing and swallowing uncomfortable. Swallowing problems caused by treatment are usually temporary, but they can sometimes be permanent.

If your cancer doctor thinks treatment will affect your swallowing, they will refer you to a speech and language therapist (SLT) and a dietitian before treatment starts. Your SLT can tell you about the effects treatment is likely to have. They will talk to you about what can help. A dietitian can help you prepare for treatment and manage any weight loss.

Let your doctor know if you are having any swallowing problems. There are different treatments that may help.

If you find drinks make you cough, tell your doctor, specialist nurse or SLT as soon as possible.

If your healthcare team think you may have swallowing problems during treatment, they may suggest you are fed through a tube for a while. This is to make sure you have enough calories to maintain or gain weight. When your swallowing improves, and you can eat and drink more through your mouth, they may remove the tube.

Tips for managing problems with swallowing

- If it hurts to chew or swallow, it may help to take painkillers before meals. Your doctor or nurse can suggest which painkillers may be best for you to take.
- Eat slowly and chew food well.
- Finely chop meat and vegetables, then casserole or stew them.
- Add sauces and gravies to moisten food. This may help make them easier to swallow.
- If you have a blender, you could liquidise cooked food.
- Some meal-delivery companies have a soft-food range.
- If you find it hard to eat enough, there are food supplements you can have as drinks in between meals. Your dietitian or GP can give you more information about these.
- If you have problems swallowing, talk to an SLT. They can tell you what can help.

Local resources:

Resource	Contact details

National resource:

Resource	Contact details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> British Dietetic Association (BDA) 	www.bda.uk.com

Further information

www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/side-effects-and-symptoms/eating-problems/problems-chewing-swallowing

Our booklets and leaflets are available to order free on be.macmillan.org.uk

- Eating problems and cancer
- Managing the late effects of head and neck cancer treatment

More information and support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm, or visit macmillan.org.uk

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.

We produce information in a range of formats and languages. To order these, visit macmillan.org.uk/otherformats or call our support line.

Revised in September 2018. Next planned review in 2021.