

# Swallowing exercises for patients having radiotherapy to the head and neck

## Speech and Language Therapy

Information for patients

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### Introduction

Having radiotherapy treatment to the head and neck can lead to **severe swallowing problems** (also known as dysphagia). Dysphagia can occur during treatment and it may persist long after radiotherapy has finished.

The following exercises have been developed in order to reduce the potential effects of radiotherapy treatment on your swallowing. You should repeat the exercises four times a day. You should start the exercises before your radiotherapy starts, as instructed by the speech and language therapist.

### Pharyngeal (throat) exercises

The pharyngeal (throat) muscles help in the process of pushing the food and drink down into the food-pipe when swallowing (**this exercise is not suitable for patients with neck or cardiac problems**).

#### The exercises:

1. Lie on your back and lift your head 4 inches, without raising your shoulders and look at your toes. Hold for one second and lower your head again. Repeat five times.
2. Lie on your back and lift your head 4 inches, without raising your shoulders and look at your toes. Hold for ten seconds and lower your head again. Rest for a minute then repeat three times.

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## Airway protection exercises

During swallowing it is important that the voice box closes tightly to prevent food or liquid from going into the lungs. The following exercises are designed to improve closure of the voice box, which will improve your swallowing and the flexibility of your voice.

### The exercises:

1. Hold your breath and bear down (push your bottom into the chair) for two seconds. Then release your breath. Repeat three times.
2. Pitch glides: sing 'ee' starting at your lowest note and then gradually glide up to your highest pitch. Hold the note for ten seconds.

## Base of tongue exercises

The base of the tongue is the 'pump' which pushes food through the throat and towards the food pipe. It is the main muscle involved in eating, drinking, swallowing and speech function. The exercises below are designed to maintain and/or increase the range of movement and strengthen the base of the tongue.

### 1. Tongue stretch exercise:

- Put your chin up as far as you can
- Push your tongue forward as far as you can
- Hold for 10 seconds
- Relax and repeat 3 times in a row

### 2. Tongue stretch exercise:

- Push your tongue forward as far as you can
- Hold the tip of your tongue with a piece of gauze or a handkerchief
- Try to pull your tongue back for up to 10 seconds
- Relax and repeat 3 times in a row

### 3. Effortful swallow:

- Swallow hard
- Relax
- Try to do this 10 times in a row and 3 sets of 10

Try for four sessions of exercises each day. If they are too easy, increase the number of repetitions. If you find them too hard, reduce the number of repetitions or the length of hold.

## Jaw exercises

The jaw needs to open and close well for chewing and speech. These exercises are important to maintain adequate movement.

### The exercises:

1. Yawn - open your mouth wide and sigh as you close your jaw. Repeat three times.
2. Jaw rotation - do this exercise first with your mouth open, then do it again with your mouth closed.
3. Imagine you are chewing gum or a toffee.
  - To begin with use small movements.
  - Then gradually increase this movement until it is as wide as you can make it.
4. Practice rotating your jaw in both directions (i.e. from side to side).

Your Speech and Language Therapist will advise you about further exercises if opening and closing your jaw becomes difficult. Please let your therapist know if mouth opening becomes a problem for you.

## Contact details

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact your Speech and Language Therapist:

Office: 0116 258 5363

Head and neck mobile 07900 714 472

If we do not get back to you on the day you left a message please assume we are not available and contact someone else involved with your care.

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Previous reference: CAN 225

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