



Your Health Education

Swallowing Changes from Head & Neck Cancer Radiation

What to expect during and after radiation...

Radiation and/or chemoradiotherapy for head and neck cancer can cause trouble with swallowing (*dysphagia*). Functional and safe swallowing requires coordination of multiple nerves and muscles.

Your swallowing therapist can help you maintain your swallowing function during and after treatment.

What are the common side effects of radiation?

*You may experience different degrees of these symptoms.

During Treatment	After Treatment (Immediate – Long-term)
Sore mouth and/or throat	Dry mouth
Pain with swallowing	Stiffness
Dry mouth	Thick saliva
Thick saliva	Altered taste
Altered taste	Changes to swallowing over time

Key things to remember...

1. Eating is exercise!
2. Changing what you eat is common during treatment. Focus on foods that are smooth, less effortful to eat, and are high in calories.
 - *You will also work with a Dietitian to provide guidelines on nutritional needs.*
3. During treatment, it is common to experience pain with swallowing. This will get better after treatment is completed.
4. Try not to skip meals. Eat small meals throughout the day when swallowing becomes effortful. It also may take you longer to eat a meal.
5. Taste sometimes changes during treatment.
6. Prevent stiffness and muscle weakness by following the plans made for you by the swallowing and physical therapists.

What can I do to manage these side-effects?

It is important to swallow throughout treatment for nutrition/ hydration and to keep your swallowing muscles strong and flexible. Eating, drinking, and daily swallowing exercises *during treatment* are important to reduce your risk of swallowing problems *after treatment*.

- *If you have a feeding tube, you should continue swallowing your saliva.*

Side-Effects:

- *Dry Mouth and Thick Saliva:*
 - Continue your oral care routine. This will help to keep your mouth moist and your saliva thin.
 - Keep a water bottle with you and take frequent drinks to help moisten your mouth and thin mucous. Drink plenty of water when you eat food.
 - Talk to your doctor about products that may help with dry mouth.
- *Taste Changes:*
 - While taste is likely to improve after treatment, many people who receive radiation for head and neck cancer experience long-term or permanent changes to taste.
 - Try different foods and flavors as you recover from treatment to figure out what works best for you.
 - If food tastes metallic, try using plasticware.
- *Stiffness and Fibrosis of the Swallowing Muscles:*
 - Stiffness is likely to worsen in the years after treatment. This can cause swallowing problem several years from now.
 - Strengthening and range of motions exercises should be done for the rest of your life as “maintenance therapy”.
- *Ulcerations in the Mouth:*
 - Avoid spicy and acidic food and drink.
- *Pain with Swallowing:*
 - Eat shortly after pain meds are taken.

What are the consequences of changes to swallowing?

- *Weight Loss*
 - Swallowing problems can make it challenging to get enough nutrition.
 - Work with a dietitian and swallowing therapist to eat more calories to keep your weight steady during and after treatment.

- *Aspiration/pneumonia*
 - *Aspiration* is when food or liquid goes “down the wrong pipe” and into your airway or lungs. Coughing during meals may be a sign you are aspirating, but some people aspirate *silently* (i.e., Without coughing/ choking).
 - Over time, aspiration can lead to *pneumonia*. Physical strength, mobility, and a good oral hygiene routine reduce your risk of developing aspiration pneumonia.
 - Aspiration risk can be reduced by following the strategies recommended by your swallowing therapist and by strengthening swallowing muscles.

- *Dehydration*
 - Dehydration can lead to hospitalization. It is important to keep drinking throughout the day to maintain good hydration.

If you have questions about speech therapy or need help getting scheduled for an appointment at one of our clinics, please contact the Survivorship swallowing therapist.