

COPING WITH TROUBLE SWALLOWING

For Patients With Cancer

What you will find inside:

- About Dysphagia
- Emotions That Come With Trouble Swallowing
- Effects of Cancer & Cancer Treatment
- Signs & Symptoms of Trouble Swallowing
- When To Take Action
- Tips to Manage Trouble Swallowing
- Calling My Healthcare Team
- Resources

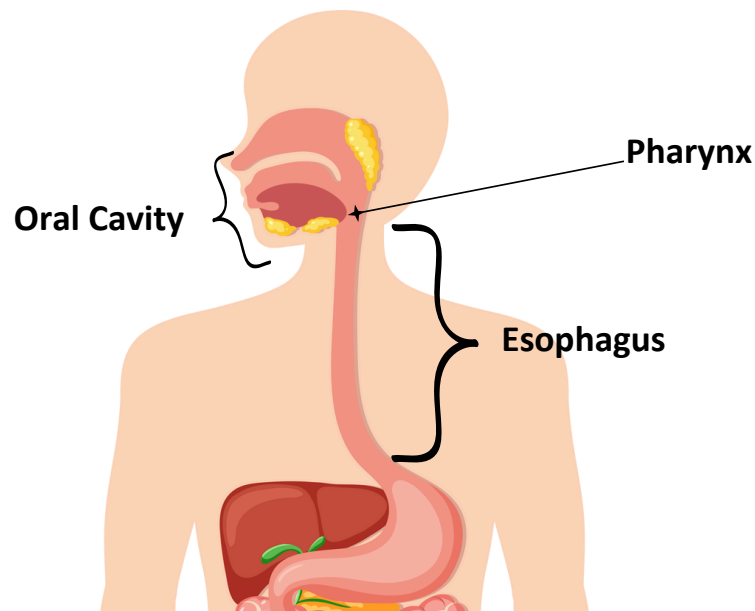
About Dysphagia

Dysphagia (dis-FAY-jee-uh) is the medical term for pain or trouble when swallowing. If you have trouble swallowing, it can be hard to eat and drink. Eating and drinking enough will help you heal, maintain your weight, and stay strong through your cancer treatments.

Trouble swallowing can happen in 3 different areas:

- Your oral cavity (mouth, lips, soft palate, tongue, or gums)
- Your pharynx (throat)
- Your esophagus (the tube that carries food and liquid from your mouth to your stomach)

The ways you can manage your dysphagia depend on the area(s) affected:



Picture 1: Diagram of the upper GI tract. This includes the: oral cavity, pharynx and esophagus.

If you have trouble swallowing you can be at a higher risk of:

- Pneumonia (chest infection)
- Obstruction (food getting caught in your esophagus)
- Aspiration (food going down your wind pipe, into your lungs)
- Malnutrition (lack of nutrients needed for the body to work it's best)
- Dehydration (losing more fluid than your body takes in)

Emotions That Come With Trouble Swallowing

Trouble swallowing can make meal times harder or more stressful. Many people who struggle with swallowing can have feelings of anxiety, sadness, fear or anger. These feelings can affect how you enjoy food and your relationship with eating. You might also feel overwhelmed having to manage these side effects at home. It's normal to feel this way, as these side effects can impact your quality of life. Put simply, dealing with pain and trouble swallowing can be tough.

Ask for help at the first sign of changes to your swallow. This can stop your side effects from getting worse. Sharing your experiences with your healthcare team will let them support you best during your treatment.

Effects of Cancer & Cancer Treatment

Trouble swallowing can be the result of a side effect of cancer treatment or the cancer itself. This can include:

- A tumour blocking your throat or esophagus
- A tumour impacting nerves that help control your swallow
- Side effects from radiation to or near your mouth, throat or esophagus
- Side effects from systemic treatment (type of cancer treatment that travels through the bloodstream to reach cells all over the body, like: chemotherapy or checkpoint inhibitors)
- Surgery

Cancer treatments can damage the mucous membranes that line the mouth, throat and esophagus. This can lead to pain or trouble swallowing. These side effects can start any time during your treatment. They may get worse over time. Sometimes side effects can last for weeks (or linger for months) after treatment is finished. Know that everyone is unique. No one can foresee who will get side effects, or how long they will last. The best way to manage pain or problems swallowing is to tell your healthcare team **as soon as you notice changes**.

Do you have trouble swallowing?

EAT-10 is an online survey that can direct you to seek help for problems swallowing. Scoring over 3 points means that you might have trouble, and should ask your healthcare team for help.

Signs & Symptoms of Trouble Swallowing

Usual signs and symptoms of trouble swallowing include:

- Pain in your mouth or throat
- Pain when you chew
- Having a hard time chewing
- Food or fluid feeling stuck in your throat or esophagus
- Having to clear your throat while eating
- Taking longer than usual to finish a meal
- Coughing or choking during or after meals
- Needing to swallow extra times to clear food
- A gurgley, wet-sounding voice after swallowing
- Trouble moving food from your mouth to your throat
- Food getting stuck in your cheeks (also called pocketing)

When To Take Action

1. **Tell your healthcare team as soon as you notice any change in your swallow.** They can suggest options to manage your trouble swallowing. This might include a referral to a specialist (e.g. Speech Language Pathologist, Registered Dietitian, or Registered Social Worker) to support you.
2. If you are eating or drinking less than usual, focus on **high protein and high calorie foods/drinks**. This can help stop or slow weight loss.
3. Take the drugs prescribed by your healthcare team. Some of these can help appetite, or control nausea, heartburn or pain.

Speech Language Pathologist

Can help you manage swallowing problems. They can guide you in how to improve your swallow and modify foods for safety.

Registered Dietitian

Can help you choose the right type and amount of food to eat. They will guide changes to your diet to help maintain your weight and strength.

Registered Social Worker

Can offer support and counselling services. They can also connect you with resources in the community.

Tips to Manage Trouble Swallowing

- Sit upright when eating
- Choose soft or moist foods
- Cut food into small, bite-sized pieces
- Completely swallow each bite before taking another
- Take your time and avoid too many distractions while eating
- Add gravy, sauces or jams (or any extra moisteners) to foods to make them easier to swallow
- Accept help from family/friends; if they offer to cook for you, let them. Tell them how to modify food to make it safe for you to swallow
- Eat slowly and pause between bites. Put your fork/spoon down between bites to help pace yourself naturally

Calling My Healthcare Team

You should contact your healthcare team right away if you have:

- Trouble swallowing
- A choking feeling
- Trouble breathing while eating
- Not been able to eat or drink for 1 or more days
- Feel like food is getting stuck in your throat or esophagus
- Pain with swallowing and if you are not coping with the pain

Call Your healthcare team

Grand River Regional Cancer Centre

519-749-4380

Weekdays from 8:30am - 4:00pm

After-Hours Care - CareChart Digital Health

1-877-681-3057

After 4pm, on weekends or holidays

Resources

Scan the QR code or click the links below to access more resources.



How to Manage Anxiety



EAT-10 Survey



How to Manage Fatigue



Easy Chew, Easy Swallow Food Ideas



How to Manage Depression



Mouth Care

J. Wesley Graham Patient & Family Resource Centre

Volunteers can help you find more information about your cancer, symptoms, or care. They can also print or email helpful resources.

Open Monday to Thursday, 9 a.m - 4 p.m.

3rd Floor (main floor) Grand River Regional Cancer Centre, J339

info@jwesleygrahamrc.ca

519-749-4380 x2080

Use this resource for your information only. It does not replace medical advice from your doctor or other healthcare professionals.



cancerpatiented@grhosp.on.ca



cancerwaterloowellington.ca

