

Swallowing Exercises

Radiation therapy to the head and neck can cause long-term swallowing problems, called dysphagia [dis-FAY-zhia]. This can make it hard to swallow food, liquid, and your saliva (spit). Swallowing problems may start during treatment or they may develop and continue long after radiation treatment has ended. These exercises may help prevent long-term swallowing problems or improve your ability to swallow.

STRAP MUSCLE EXERCISES

Moving your voice box (larynx) up and out of the way can help keep food and liquid from entering your lungs when you swallow. These exercises can help you increase the flexibility and strength of your voice box.

Shaker Exercise (part 1)

- Lie down on your back on the bed or floor. Do not use a pillow because your shoulders must be flat against the surface.
- Keeping your shoulders flat against the bed or floor, lift up your head, bringing your chin down to your chest (until you can see your toes), and hold for 30 seconds.
- Lower your head and rest for 45 to 60 seconds.
- Repeat this exercise 3 times.

Shaker Exercise (part 2)

- Lie down on your back on the bed or floor. Do not use a pillow because your shoulders must be flat against the surface.
- Keeping your shoulders flat against the bed or floor, lift up your head, bringing your chin down to your chest (until you can see your toes), then immediately lower your head.
- Repeat this exercise 30 times.

Mendelsohn [men-dil-son] Exercise

- Put your fingers over the bulge at the front of your throat (sometimes called the Adam's apple). Swallow and feel the Adam's apple lift and lower as you swallow.
- Now, as you swallow, hold the Adam's apple in the "up" position for at least 3 seconds by squeezing your throat muscles and holding your breath.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

Stretch Exercise

- Tilt your head back and open your mouth.
- Stick your jaw out forward and then push your jaw up toward your nose for 5 seconds. You should feel a stretch along the front of your neck.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

AIRWAY PROTECTION EXERCISES

As you swallow it is important for the voice box to close tightly to keep food or liquid from entering your lungs. These exercises are designed to help your voice box close when you swallow.

Supraglottic Swallow

- Hold your breath tightly, swallow hard 2 times, release your breath with a sharp cough, and swallow again.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

Pitch Glides

- Sing "ee" starting in a low tone and then slowly raise your tone to your highest pitch. Hold the pitch for 10 to 20 seconds.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

BASE OF TONGUE EXERCISES

The base of your tongue is the "pump" that pushes food through the throat and into the esophagus (the tube that connects the throat with the stomach). These exercises are designed to strengthen the base of the tongue.

Masako [mah-sah-ko] Exercise

- Stick out your tongue, hold it between your lips and teeth, and try to swallow.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

Effortful Swallowing

- Swallow as hard as you can with food or saliva in your mouth. Push as hard as you can with your tongue against the roof of your mouth while you swallow.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

Gargle

- Pull your tongue back to your throat as if you were going to gargle and hold for 1 second.
- Repeat this exercise 5 times.

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