

Dysphagia (Difficulty Swallowing) After Neck Surgery

After neck surgery, you will likely have a sore throat, and you may also have a difficult time swallowing (dysphagia).

What is dysphagia?

Dysphagia [dis-fay-jee-ah] is having difficulty swallowing foods or liquids.

What are the symptoms?

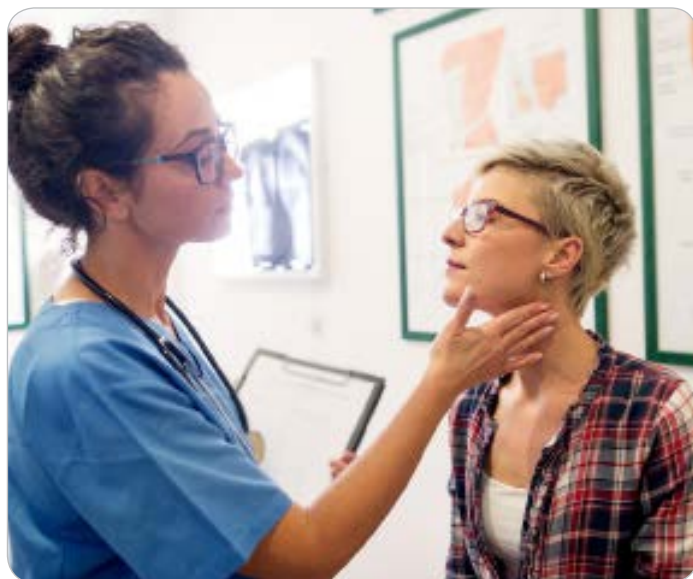
Common symptoms of dysphagia include:

- Choking while swallowing
- Coughing while swallowing
- Having trouble swallowing saliva, food, pills, or liquids
- Being unable to swallow
- Pain while swallowing

How is it diagnosed?

After your surgery, your care team will monitor you for any swallowing problems. To do this, you may be started on clear liquids and then moved to soft foods, such as applesauce.

Patients who are able to swallow without too much difficulty are typically able to go home 1 or 2 days after surgery. If you are having serious trouble swallowing, you may need to stay in the hospital to be monitored for complications. Your doctor may have you seen by a speech pathologist for a swallowing evaluation.



How long will it last?

Recovery will depend on your specific situation, but most patients regain their ability to swallow without difficulty within a few days after surgery. In certain situations, swallowing difficulties may last longer but should steadily improve as you recover.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor if you continue to have serious trouble swallowing after going home or if you are choking, coughing a lot, or having difficulty meeting your nutritional needs.

Helpful tips following surgery

Following the tips below can help you manage your symptoms and swallow when it's difficult. It's important to make sure you get enough calories, stay hydrated, and are able to take any medications you are prescribed.

Swallowing foods

- **Avoid hard or dry foods**, such as potato chips, crackers, and nuts.
- **Eat soft foods**, such as yogurt, applesauce, and creamy soups.
- **Blend (puree) foods that are hard**, such as meats, vegetables, and fruits. Using a food processor or blender to break down these foods can help you get enough calories. Make sure to add enough liquid (water, broth, or milk) so the food is not too thick and is easier to swallow.
- **Use a bendable straw** to make it easier to put food into your mouth so you can limit the movement of your head and neck.

Swallowing pills

There are 3 techniques that may help you swallow pills easier:

1 Lean forward while swallowing

- Place the tablet or pill on your tongue.
- Take a sip of water, but do not swallow it.
- Lean your head slightly forward, bringing your chin a little down and toward your chest (this movement is relatively subtle, and your chin should not touch your chest).
- In this position, swallow the pill.

2 Place the pill in a teaspoon of pureed (blended) food and then swallow.

3 Crush the pill, mix it into the pureed food, and then swallow. Not all pills should be crushed. Please make sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist if your pills can be crushed.

Questions for my doctor

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