

Proactive Intervention: A Pre-Treatment Guide for Patients

Swallowing Intervention for Patients with Head and Neck Cancer

Part of the VA Intensive Dysphagia Treatment Program

Appointment: You will be meeting with _____ on _____.

About the Program

This program is for Veterans who are undergoing treatment for head and neck cancer. Swallowing and eating can be harder during this time. The program can support your health during cancer treatment. Your team can help you control side effects, stay nourished, and exercise swallowing muscles. This can prevent problems during and after treatment.

Team Members

- Speech/Swallowing Therapist (SLP) _____
- Registered Dietitian (RD) _____
- Medical treatment team
(ENT, Radiation Oncology, Hematology Oncology) _____



Why Swallow Therapy?

Sometimes people with head and neck cancer don't have problems swallowing before their cancer treatment. Maybe you feel that way. Unfortunately, cancer treatments like radiation can damage swallowing muscles and cause swallowing problems. Sometimes this does not happen until years later. Problems with swallowing can affect your health and quality of life.

Radiation and/or Chemotherapy Effects on Swallowing

You may experience side effects related to your treatment. How severe and how long these side effects are experienced are different for each person. Your SLP will watch your symptoms closely and provide recommendations during and after your treatment.

Possible Short-Term Effects

These can include:

- Swelling of the neck
- Irritation, sores, or pain in your mouth or throat
- Pain when swallowing
- Choking or coughing while eating or drinking
- Dry mouth and/or thick saliva
- Jaw soreness and difficulty opening your mouth
- Changes to taste and appetite

Possible Long-Term Effects

These can include:

- **Fibrosis:** hardening of swallowing muscles
- **Strictures:** narrowing of esophagus
- **Xerostomia:** dry mouth

Swallow therapy is important to reduce the severity of the acute effects and prevent permanent swallowing problems!

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How Can I Prevent Swallowing Problems?

You can help prevent swallowing problems by:

- Eating every day, even when it is hard, and incorporating challenging foods into your diet
- Drinking lots of fluids, especially water
- Cleaning your teeth and mouth often
- Doing swallowing exercises that your SLP will teach you

Pre-Treatment Clinic Appointment



Your first appointment might be longer than usual (up to 2 hours). You will have a swallow study (x-ray exam). Your SLP will look for any swallowing problems before you start your radiation treatment. You may have already noticed changes to your swallow. Your SLP will teach you what foods and liquids are safest and easiest to swallow at this time.

Next, you will sit down with the SLP and RD to assess the following:

- Weight and current diet
- Tongue strength and movement
- Jaw opening



The team will check these things during your treatment to help you stay healthy.

Doing Your Exercises

Your SLP will teach you swallowing exercises. You must complete these each day, during and after treatment, to prevent swallowing problems.

If you have pain that is so severe that you cannot do your exercises or eat, it is important to tell your medical team so they can help you.

Weekly Follow Up Appointments

You will meet with your SLP weekly during your treatment. These visits should be convenient for you. They can happen in person or with a video or telephone call. Each visit will be about 15-20 minutes long. At each visit, your SLP will check on any symptoms, including:

- Weight
- Swallow function
- Tongue strength and range of motion
- Jaw opening
- Any mouth sores related to radiation treatment



Your SLP will review your swallow exercise program, food/liquid intake, and oral care with you. We can answer questions and help with problems you might have during treatment. Your care team is here to support you!