

A Swallowing Guide for Patients After Head and Neck Cancer Treatment
Head and Neck Cancer Proactive Intervention Program
Part of the VA Intensive Dysphagia Treatment Program

Appointment: You will be meeting with _____ on _____.

About the Program

This program is for Veterans who have been treated for head and neck cancer to provide support for overall health following treatment. Swallowing and eating can be difficult during and after treatment. Your team can help you control side effects, stay nourished, and exercise your 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 AFTER Cancer Treatment?

Congratulations! You finished your cancer treatment. During treatment you may have had pain or problems with swallowing. Your team members checked in with you to help with pain management, eating, and your swallow exercise plan. Even though your cancer treatment is over, completing swallowing exercises daily is still important. This is to help prevent long term problems.

Radiation and/or Chemotherapy Effects on Swallowing

After treatment, some damage to swallowing muscles might not appear until *months* or *years* after treatment. Long-term effects can cause problems with quality of life and health.

Possible Long-Term Effects

- **Fibrosis:** hardening of swallowing muscles
- **Strictures:** narrowing of esophagus
- **Xerostomia:** dry mouth
- **Neuropathy:** damage to nerves causing numbness or weakness
- **Trismus:** spasms and tightening of jaw muscles

You should continue your usual swallowing exercises for at least **1 month** after treatment.

After that, your SLP will work with you on a maintenance plan for the future. Continued swallowing exercises will be part of the plan. You will also need to return for follow up in the future. Your schedule will depend on your needs and what is recommended by your medical team.

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1-Month and 3-Month Follow-Up

Your 1-month and 3-month appointments will allow your team to check on your recovery after treatment. They will evaluate how you are doing with eating and swallowing and help you with any ongoing problems.

These follow-up visits will be similar to the weekly follow-ups you had during treatment. The following measures will be tracked:

- Weight
- Current food/liquid intake
- Tongue and cough strength
- Tongue movement
- Jaw opening
- Review of swallow exercises and oral care



Formal Swallowing Assessment



At these appointments your swallow function will be checked. This might be done with an x-ray test or with endoscopy. Both kinds of tests help your team to see images of the throat and voice box. They will show if food or liquid is going down safely, without entering the airway. These tests will also show if food is getting stuck in the throat.



Continued Follow-Up

You should have a visit with your SLP, with an x-ray and/or endoscopy swallow test, 6 months and 1 year after your cancer treatment has ended.

This will help your SLP to know if you need ongoing treatment for swallowing problems. It might be recommended that you complete:

- Swallowing maintenance exercises, OR
- More intensive swallow therapy

After 1 year has passed, annual check-up visits are recommended.

Even if you do not feel like you have swallowing problems now, it's important to continue checking up to catch any changes that might happen early.

***Swallowing problems can develop 5 to 10 years after treatment.
Your team is here to help you with problems or challenges in the future!***