

Managing Swallowing Problems From Radiation Therapy

Some patients receiving radiation therapy to the chest, neck, and upper back may experience an inflammation of the esophagus (eh-SOFuh-gus), the long tube that connects the mouth to the stomach. You may notice the following symptoms:

- Feeling a “lump” in your throat when you swallow
- Soreness when swallowing
- Increased difficulty in swallowing

Please ask your nurse to review this information with you and answer any questions you may have. Keep your nurse and doctor informed of your concerns about swallowing. The inflammation and soreness usually last for seven to 10 days after radiation therapy treatment to your chest or back has ended or two to three weeks after treatment to your head and neck has ended.

Helpful Hints to Manage Swallowing Problems

- Cut food into small pieces and chew thoroughly, or puree your food in a blender.
- Moisten your food with gravy, sauces, broth, or milk to make it easier to swallow.
- Drink sips of liquid between bites of food.
- Soft foods are easier to swallow. Try gelatin, yogurt, pudding, pasta, cooked vegetables, canned fruit, soft-cooked eggs, applesauce, cooked cereal, cottage cheese, ice cream, and sherbet.
- Cool, but not frozen, foods may be soothing to an irritated throat.
- Allow hot foods to cool to room temperature.
- Rough foods like nuts, crackers, dry cereal, and raw fruits and vegetables may irritate your throat and esophagus and should be avoided.
- Citrus foods like oranges, grapefruit, lemons, limes, and tomatoes may cause increased discomfort in your throat and esophagus.
- Avoid spicy foods.
- Do not use alcohol or tobacco.
- Use toothpaste that does not contain peroxide.
- Use mouthwash that does not contain peroxide or alcohol.
- If you are unable to eat as you should and are losing weight, nutritional supplements can be recommended by a registered dietitian, nurse, or your doctor.
- If you have trouble swallowing pills, ask your nurse or pharmacist if you can crush them and take them with a teaspoon of ice cream or another soft food, such as applesauce. Check to see if your medication comes in liquid form.
- Drink six to eight glasses of fluids a day, unless your doctor has restricted the amount of fluids you may have due to another medical condition.
- Use lozenges, throat sprays, or other medications to help numb your mouth and throat. These may be very helpful before meals and at bedtime. Ask your nurse about these products.
- If you have pain medication prescribed, it is usually best to take it 30 minutes to one hour before you eat.

If you have further questions, call:
