

EAT Through Radiation Treatment

A Program for Head and Neck Patients

Radiation to the head and neck can lead to long-term swallowing problems called **dysphagia**. Patients with dysphagia have a hard time swallowing food, liquid or saliva. Dysphagia can occur during treatment, or may develop or continue long after radiation treatment has ended.

Keeping swallowing muscles “active” during radiation can help prevent or lessen the severity of long-term dysphagia. Therefore, it is important to keep eating during treatment. Swallowing thick or heavy foods that are challenging is good exercise for your throat. Side effects like pain, changes in saliva, and taste can make it hard or unpleasant to eat many solid foods, mainly in the last half of radiation.

Eat All Through (EAT) Radiation Treatment

EAT is a program designed to help you safely eat the most challenging foods you can throughout your radiation. The goal is to maintain your ability to swallow.

Think of the foods you eat as a form of exercise for your throat muscles. The **EAT Staircase** (Figure 1) describes different types of foods for your throat muscles. It starts from most challenging at the top and goes down to less challenging at the bottom.

You are likely eating foods around the top step before you start your radiation. Your goal is to adjust your diet step-by-step as needed, rather than going down the staircase quickly so that your swallowing muscles stay active as long as possible. Your care team (speech pathologists, dietitians and radiation team) can help you with this goal.

Take a step in the right direction!

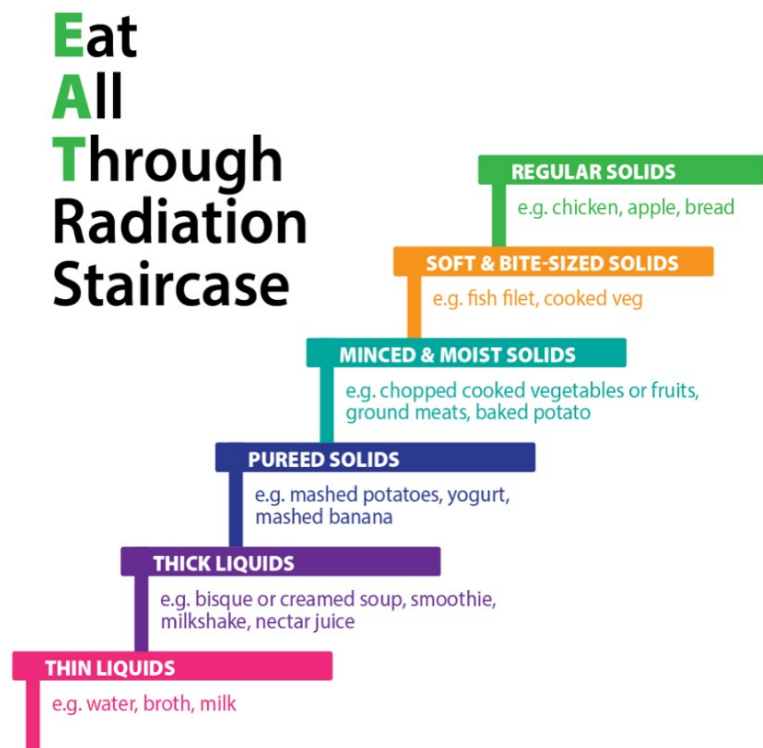


Figure 1. EAT Staircase

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Goal: To keep eating challenging foods (top and middle of staircase) as long as you can during treatment. You are guided down the staircase, as needed, to manage radiation treatment side effects.

EAT Mealtime Routine

Use these tips to help you **Eat All** through **Treatment (EAT)**:

1. Food Choice and Meal Preparation

- Use the **EAT** Staircase to help you choose the most challenging level of foods that you feel comfortable to swallow with your current treatment side effects.

2. Pain Medicine

- If prescribed by your doctor, take pain medicines 30 to 40 minutes before you plan to eat.

3. Mouth Care (before you eat)

- About 5 minutes before mealtime, use your oral rinse solution (baking soda gargle, flat club soda, or salt-water rinse) to clear mucus from your mouth and throat. This may help you eat more comfortably.
- Next, if your doctor has prescribed a pain rinse, swish and spit using this rinse to help pain when eating.

4. Tips to Manage Taste Changes

- Taste changes occur for most patients during radiation treatment. As you use the **EAT** Staircase to set goals, talk with your care team about any taste issues. They may help find solutions that best meet your needs. The sense of smell and taste are connected. If you are not feeling nauseous, take a moment to smell your food before eating. This may help trigger a positive memory of what the food item should taste like.

5. Tips for Swallowing

- You may feel solid foods stick in your throat while you eat. Instead of using a drink to wash the food through your throat, try a hard, fast swallow. Swallow as many times as needed to clear food from your throat. It may help to add extra sauces and gravies to your solid foods.

6. Mouth Care (after you eat)

- Clean your mouth well after you eat. Use an oral rinse and tooth brush, as tolerated.

7. Other Tips for EAT

- If you have a feeding tube, eat first, then use the tube so you are hungry when you are eating your meal. If you use the tube first, you may feel full sooner and may not eat or swallow as much.

8. Additional Suggestions
