Swallowing Lab
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
University Health Network

Swallowing during Radiotherapy

Head and Neck Radiation Therapy Patients

Head and neck radiation can lead to swallowing problems called **dysphagia**. It makes it hard to swallow food, liquid or saliva. Swallowing problems can occur during and after treatment. They can also occur or last long after radiation treatment has ended.

You ***actively*** use your mouth, throat, and voice box (larynx) muscles when you swallow to push food, liquid, and saliva down into the food pipe (esophagus). As your muscles push it down, your voice box closes to keep things you are swallowing from going the wrong way into the wind pipe (trachea) and the lungs. Swallowing is a complex function and is done all through muscle movements.

It may prevent or lessen the effects of dysphagia if you keep swallowing muscles ***active*** during radiation. This may help maintain muscle function.

Watch for swallowing problems
There are signs that may alert you or your health care team to swallowing problems. Tell your health care team **right** away if you have any of these signs during radiation treatment:

- Coughing or choking when you eat and drink
- Unable to eat or drink at all or you start using your feeding tube for all your nutritional intake
- Develop symptoms of a chest infection or pneumonia such as fever and/or a productive cough

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