

How will Head & Neck Radiotherapy and Chemotherapy affect my swallowing?

Department / Service

Directorate / Operating Group

Location (if site specific)

This leaflet has been designed to give you important information about your procedure, and to answer some common queries that you may have.



Information for patients and visitors

Introduction

This leaflet has been produced to give you general information about how head and neck chemo-radiotherapy / radiotherapy may affect your swallowing. Most of your questions should be answered by this leaflet.

It is not intended to replace the discussion between you and your Speech and Language Therapist, but may act as a starting point for discussion.

If after reading it you have any concerns or require further explanation, please discuss this with your Speech and Language Therapist.

Why do swallowing problems occur?

Radiation destroys fast multiplying cells like tumour cells. However, you also have fast multiplying cells in your mouth and throat which means that they can also be damaged.

Swallowing problems can occur because the damaged cells cannot be replaced quickly enough, leading to a sore, dry mouth and throat.

What are the signs of swallowing difficulty?

- Difficulty keeping saliva, food or liquids in the mouth
- Difficulty biting or chewing
- Difficulty moving and controlling food and liquids in the mouth
- Difficulty moving food to the back of the mouth in order to swallow it
- Bits of food getting left in the mouth
- Food or liquids getting stuck in the throat

- Food or liquids going down 'the wrong way' into the windpipe (this is called 'aspiration') causing coughing, choking, wet or 'gurgly' voice, shortness of breath, chest infections and pneumonia

Each person is different. The nature and severity of swallowing problems will be determined by which part of the head or neck you are having treatment to. In addition, symptoms may be worse if you are also having chemotherapy

When do swallowing difficulties usually occur?

Difficulties swallowing often start in the first 3-4 weeks during treatment and may persist for a few weeks or months even after treatment has finished, depending on the severity of the problem.

How are swallowing problems managed?

You can be referred to a Speech and Language Therapist who will assess and manage your swallowing difficulties. He or she may advise:

- Swallowing exercises to complete before, during and after your treatment
- Safe swallowing techniques or postures
- A modified diet such as puree or soft foods. These consistencies are easier to chew and move around the mouth
- Thickened fluids which travel more slowly and allow your muscles extra time to close the entrance to your windpipe
- If the swallowing problem is severe and food or drinks are likely to go into the lungs, you may be advised not to eat or drink at all. If this situation is likely to



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Information for patients and visitors

persist for a few days or weeks, you may need to be fed by a tube. There are two types of tubes commonly used for feeding: a tube going from the nose to the stomach (called a nasogastric tube) or a tube that goes directly into your stomach (called a RIG or a PEG)

The Speech and Language Therapist will monitor your swallowing and advise you of any changes.

What foods may be easier to manage?

People undergoing radiotherapy treatment often find that soft, moist, smooth foods are easier to manage. Foods that may irritate a sore mouth and throat are:

- Dry food
- Spicy food
- Very hot food and drink
- Acidic food
- Alcohol and spirits

Dietary Advice

It is very important to make sure you are having enough to eat and drink during your treatment. If you are having swallowing problems you may not be eating enough. You may therefore need to see a Dietitian who can advise you on how to increase your calorie intake.

Medications

There are different medicines you can take to help with pain and soreness in your mouth and throat. You can find out about these by speaking to your doctor.

Acknowledgements

This leaflet has been distributed by Speech and Language Therapy Department at Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust.

The content was written by the speech and language therapy team at Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust.

Concerns and Queries

If you have any concerns / queries about any of the services offered by the Trust, in the first instance, please speak to the person providing your care.

For Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital

Alternatively you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on (01472) 875403 or at the PALS office which is situated near the main entrance.

For Scunthorpe General Hospital

Alternatively you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on (01724) 290132 or at the PALS office which is situated on C Floor.

Alternatively you can email:
nlg-tr.PALS@nhs.net

Confidentiality

Information on NHS patients is collected in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons (e.g. providing care and treatment, managing and planning the NHS, training and educating staff, research etc.).

Everyone working for the NHS has a legal duty to keep information about you confidential. Information will only ever be shared with people who have a genuine need for it (e.g. your GP or other professionals from whom you have been



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receiving care) or if the law requires it, for example, to notify a birth.

Please be assured however that anyone who receives information from us is also under a legal duty to keep it confidential.

Zero Tolerance - Violent, Threatening and Abusive Behaviour

The Trust and its staff are committed to providing high quality care to patients within the department. However, we wish to advise all patients / visitors that the following inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated:

- Swearing
- Threatening / abusive behaviour
- Verbal / physical abuse

The Trust reserves the right to withdraw from treating patients whom are threatening / abusive / violent and ensuring the removal of those persons from the premises.

All acts of criminal violence and aggression will be notified to the Police immediately.

Risk Management Strategy

The Trust welcomes comments and suggestions from patients and visitors that could help to reduce risk.

Perhaps you have experienced something whilst in hospital, whilst attending as an outpatient or as a visitor and you felt at risk.

Please tell a member of staff on the ward or in the department you are attending / visiting.

Moving & Handling

The Trust operates a Minimal Lifting Policy, which in essence means patients are only ever lifted by nursing staff in an emergency situation.

Patients are always encouraged to help themselves as much as possible when mobilising, and if unable to do so, equipment may be used to assist in their safe transfer.

If you have any questions regarding moving and handling of patients within the Trust, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department you are visiting.

Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust

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Grimsby
01472 874111

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