

Swallowing exercises for patients having radiotherapy to the head and neck

Speech and Language Therapy

Information for Patients

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Introduction

Having radiotherapy treatment to the head and neck can lead to **swallowing problems** (also known as dysphagia). Dysphagia can occur during treatment and it may persist long after radiotherapy has finished.

What's the purpose of the speech and swallow exercises?

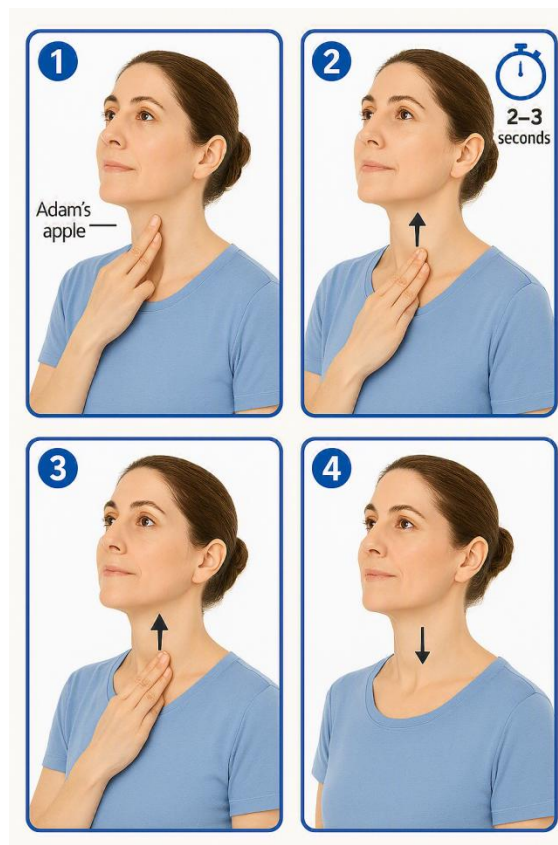
The following exercises have been developed in order to strengthen muscles and increase movement in your jaw, tongue, throat and larynx (voice box). The aim is to reduce fibrosis (scarring and stiffness) to swallowing muscles during radiotherapy treatment.

How frequently should I be doing these exercises?

You should start the exercises before your radiotherapy starts, as instructed by the speech and language therapist and should be continued until you return to baseline swallowing. Try for three sessions of exercises each day. If they are too easy, increase the number of repetitions. If you find them too hard, reduce the number of repetitions or the length of hold.

The Mendelsohn Exercise– to strengthen the floor of mouth muscles.

1. Place your fingers gently on your throat to feel your Adam's apple.
2. Start your swallow and feel your voice box rise and fall.
3. On the next swallow, as you feel your Adam's apple reach the top, squeeze your throat muscles to hold it in that elevated position for 2 to 3 seconds.
4. Let your throat muscles relax, allowing the voice box to drop back down normally.



Pitch glide

To maintain good movement of your voice box, this supports safe swallowing, airway protection, and clearer speech.

Sing 'ee' starting at your lowest note and then gradually glide up to your highest pitch. Hold the note for ten seconds.

Tongue exercises

The tongue is essential for moving food safely and producing clear speech, and radiotherapy can reduce its strength and flexibility.

1. Tongue stretch exercise:

Push your tongue forward as far as you can and hold for 10secs.

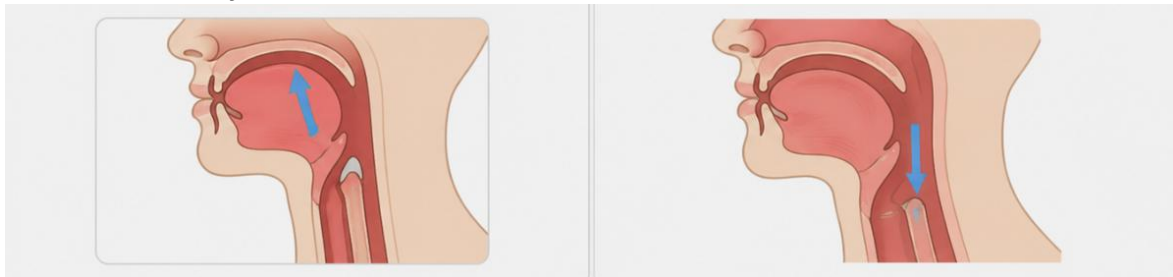
2. Tongue Hold:

- Hold the tip of your tongue between your teeth and swallow
- Relax and repeat 3 times in a row



3. Effortful swallow:

- Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth as hard as you can.
- Swallow as hard as you can.



Jaw exercises

The jaw needs to open and close well for chewing and speech. These exercises are important to maintain adequate movement.

The exercises:

1. Open your mouth as wide as you can and hold (5-10 secs).
2. Jaw rotation - Practice rotating your jaw in both directions (i.e. from side to side).
3. Imagine you are chewing gum or a toffee.
 - To begin with use small movements.
 - Then gradually increase this movement until it is as wide as you can make it.

Your Speech and Language Therapist will advise you about further exercises if opening and closing your jaw becomes difficult. Please let your therapist know if mouth opening becomes a problem for you.

Contact details

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact your Speech and Language Therapist:

Office: 0116 258 5363

Head and neck mobile 07900 714 472

If we do not get back to you on the day you left a message please assume we are not available and contact someone else involved with your care.

Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice

Visit www.uhleicester.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals.

To give feedback about this information sheet, contact uhl-tr.informationforpatientsmailbox@nhs.net

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If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email uhl-tr.equalitymailbox@nhs.net

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