

Medical Oncology

Trouble Swallowing (Dysphagia) Information Sheet

Some types of cancer or treatment for cancer can cause swallowing problems. If you have trouble swallowing, treatment can sometimes make this worse. When people have trouble drinking or eating, they might avoid doing so. This can lead to weight loss and even dehydration. Make sure you tell your doctor, nurse or dietitian if you are having a hard time swallowing. Ask your doctor for medicine if you have pain when swallowing.

If you are coughing, gagging or choking when eating or drinking, always inform your doctor, nurse or dietitian. When food goes down the “wrong pipe”, it is called aspiration. This can cause pneumonia. If this occurs, you will be referred to a speech therapist who will evaluate if it is safe for you to swallow. The speech therapist will determine the safest way for you to get nutrition.

Tips when it is Hard to Swallow

- If you have seen a speech therapist, always follow their instructions for eating.
- Always sit up as straight as possible with your shoulders level while eating.
- If food gets stuck, for even a short time, stand up, stretch the top half of your body and walk around. It may help the food slip down into your stomach. Never lie down.
- If you have false teeth, make sure they are fitting properly.
- Stop eating three hours before you go to bed. If food gets stuck in your esophagus overnight, it can be very uncomfortable and sometimes painful.
- Cut up your food into small pieces. Take small bites and chew well before swallowing.
- Take sips of water with each bite of food.
- Make sure you have plenty of time to eat and you are not rushed.
- Moisten food well with sauces, gravies and syrups.
- Blend, chop or puree food in a food processor or blender.

Call your Doctor or Nurse if:

- You are having troubles with coughing, gagging or choking when eating or drinking.
- Loss of weight due to inability to eat or drink.

See the *Chemotherapy and Immunotherapy Patient Guide* book for more information.

If you have questions or concerns, please call your care team at:
Bronson Cancer Center – Battle Creek 269-245-8660
Bronson Cancer Center – Kalamazoo 269-286-7170