

Swallowing Tips

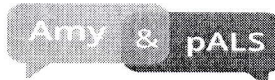
Swallowing is a combination of purposeful movements and “reflexes” that normally take one or two seconds. Various illnesses can weaken or slow down the muscles that are involved in any of the different stages of a swallow. The goal of the following recommendations is to make swallowing safer and more comfortable while maintaining nutrition and hydration and preventing pneumonia. Pneumonia can result from having food or liquids go down the wrong pipe (this is called aspiration.) **The stages of swallowing are described below:** 1) **Oral Stage:** The food enters the mouth and is chewed. The tongue, lips, and cheeks all help keep the food in a manageable mass that can be easily moved to the back of the mouth before the actual swallow begins. Weakness in any of the oral muscles can result in reduced ability to chew and control food in the mouth. 2) **Pharyngeal Stage:** This stage starts when the food reaches the back of the mouth and the swallow itself is initiated. The back roof of the mouth moves up to close off the nose from the throat so that no food goes in the nose. The larynx (voice box) moves to close off the entry into the airway. The throat muscles push the food down to enter the esophagus. If any of the muscles involved in this stage of the swallow are weakened, one may experience food going into the nose, feeling stuck in the throat, or entering the wrong pipe which can result in coughing. 3) **Esophageal Stage:** The muscles of the esophagus (tube to the stomach) push the food down into the stomach. Some illnesses weaken the sphincter at the top of the esophagus which keeps food from coming back up in the form of reflux following a meal. Spasticity or tightness of this sphincter may result in the food getting “stuck” at the top of the esophagus.

Below are common complaints and recommendations related to swallowing:

Complaint	Why does this happen?	What can I do about it?
ORAL PHASE		
I get tired when chewing my food.	Weakened tongue, jaw and cheek muscles.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Eat more frequent smaller meals. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cut foods, like meats, into very small pieces. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Eat softer foods, like pastas & eggs that require less chewing.
Food spreads through my mouth and gets pocketed around my gums.	Weakened tongue and cheek muscles.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Be certain food is moist enough to stay clumped together. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Take smaller bites. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Avoid foods which are sticky (such as lettuce and peanut butter.)
Food and liquids escape from my lips.	Weakened lip muscles.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use a napkin to keep your lips tightly closed after taking in food or liquids. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Do NOT tip your head back to direct food and liquids away from your lips. This can cause food/liquid to enter the throat before the body is ready to swallow and then drizzle into unprotected airways.

Complaint	Why does this happen?	What can I do about it?
PHARYNGEAL PHASE		
I cough when I'm drinking thin liquids.	Thin liquids, such as water, travel quickly through the mouth and down the throat. If muscles are weakened, the vocal folds may not have time to close and protect the airway. Though the body can absorb a small amount of liquid (from a beverage or one's own saliva) if it enters the lungs, the bacteria that travel with it from the mouth puts one at risk for developing pneumonia. Practicing good oral hygiene significantly reduces this risk.	<input type="checkbox"/> Switch to cold, carbonated, flavored liquids which trigger a faster swallow. Sour flavors are most effective in providing stimulation. <input type="checkbox"/> Take small sips. <input type="checkbox"/> Take one sip at a time. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Keep your chin down towards your chest as you sip. This widens the space in your throat through which liquid may safely pass. <input type="checkbox"/> Concentrate on swallowing. Consider turning off the television or radio and save conversation for when you're not eating. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drink with a straw. This keeps your chin tucked and helps you control how much liquid you are taking in each sip. <input type="checkbox"/> Oral hold: Hold food or liquid for a moment on your cupped tongue before swallowing. Control it & keep it all together before swallowing. <input type="checkbox"/> Double swallow: If your voice is gurgly after swallow or you feel a tickle, swallow again without taking another sip or bite. <input type="checkbox"/> Drink thicker liquids such as smoothies and blended coffee drinks. <input type="checkbox"/> Add a thickener such as Thick & Easy to your drinks. Soups may be thickened with instant mashed potatoes. <input type="checkbox"/> Be sure to maintain good oral hygiene: floss and brush all surfaces in the mouth at least twice a day and use a mouthwash like Biotene (your dentist may suggest Chlorhexidine rinse or gel). It is especially important to observe these habits before bed which is the most likely time to aspirate saliva.
I cough on liquids when eating mixed-consistency foods (such as soup or cereal with milk.)	Liquids travel quickly and may seep to the back of the mouth and down the throat while you are chewing the solid parts of the bite you've taken.	<input type="checkbox"/> Separate bites by taking only liquids (such as broth) or only solids (such as vegetables) in each mouthful. <input type="checkbox"/> Blend foods to a uniform consistency.
When I take pills they feel stuck in my throat.	Large pills can require more effort to swallow than other consistencies and may present a challenge when the muscles involved are weak. In addition, we often instinctually toss our heads back when swallowing pills and this only makes the problem worse by both narrowing the space through which the pill must pass <i>and</i> making the pill move too quickly for the muscles to respond in time.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Coat pills in olive oil. Tap your finger in oil and rub on pill. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Keep chin tucked or drink through a straw when taking pills. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Put whole pills in apple sauce, yogurt or pudding. <input type="checkbox"/> Crush pills and put in apple sauce, yogurt or pudding.
ESOPHAGEAL PHASE		
I get heartburn after eating.	The sphincter that keeps ingested food and digestive acids in the stomach may be weak.	<input type="checkbox"/> Remain in an upright position for 45 minutes following meals.
It feels like a have a shelf of food stuck just above my stomach.	The sphincter that opens to allow food to enter the stomach may be not opening widely enough.	<input type="checkbox"/> Try eating thinner, softer (pureed) foods. <input type="checkbox"/> Eat more slowly, taking smaller bites.

For more tips and strategies about living well with ALS visit



AmyandPALS.com