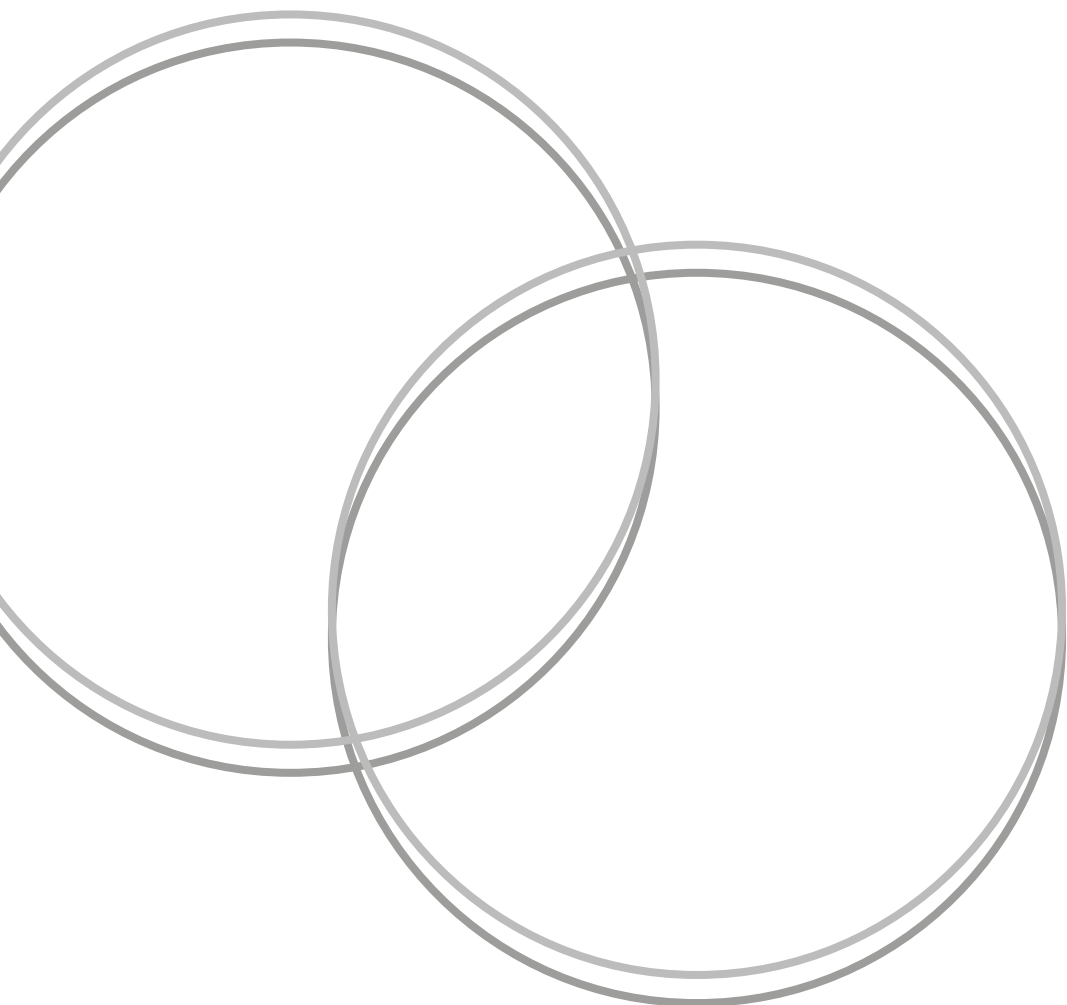


Swallowing and voice during radiotherapy to the head and neck

Information for patients



This leaflet is for patients having radiotherapy to the head and neck area, particularly those receiving treatment to the main tumour site and both sides of the neck.

Please check with your Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) whether the advice in this leaflet is suitable for you and your specific treatment.

What to expect

Radiotherapy to the head and neck can affect your ability to eat, drink and swallow. Common side effects include:

- Tightness or stiffness in the swallowing muscles.
- Dry mouth.
- Changes in taste.

Other side effects may occur and can vary from person to person.

How severe these effects are depends on:

- The area being treated.
- The dose of radiotherapy.
- Your individual response to treatment.

Side effects often build up gradually during treatment and can continue to worsen for around two weeks after treatment ends. This is usually when symptoms are at their worst. Swallowing difficulties may start during treatment and can persist for a short period afterwards. Although recovery takes time, these problems are temporary for most people and will gradually improve.

Why eating is important

The best way to support your swallowing muscles during radiotherapy is to keep them active and flexible. You can do this by continuing to eat throughout your treatment, even if you need to adapt what you eat.

The EAT Ladder

The EAT Ladder is a guide to help you choose food textures that are safe but still provide enough challenge for your swallowing muscles.

- Foods at the top of the ladder are the most challenging to swallow.
- Foods at the bottom are the easiest.

Try to think of eating as exercise for your swallowing muscles.

Your goal is to stay as close to the top of the ladder as you can during treatment. However, as side effects develop, you may need to move down the ladder by choosing foods that are softer or more moist.

Even if you need to adapt your diet, aim to stay as high on the ladder as possible. This helps keep your swallowing muscles strong and flexible. Foods that are thicker or require more effort to swallow can provide good exercise for your throat.

Regular solids

e.g. chicken, apple, bread

Soft and bitesized solids

e.g. fish, cooked veg

Minced and moist solids

e.g. ground meats, well-cooked baked potato without skin

Pureed solids

e.g. mashed potato, mashed bananas, yoghurt

Thick liquids

e.g. creamed soups, smoothies, milkshakes

Thin liquids

e.g. water, broth, milk

Voice care during radiotherapy

The area being treated with radiotherapy is close to your voice box (larynx). Because of this, you may notice changes to your voice during treatment. These can vary depending on the location of your tumour and the treatment you receive.

How your voice works

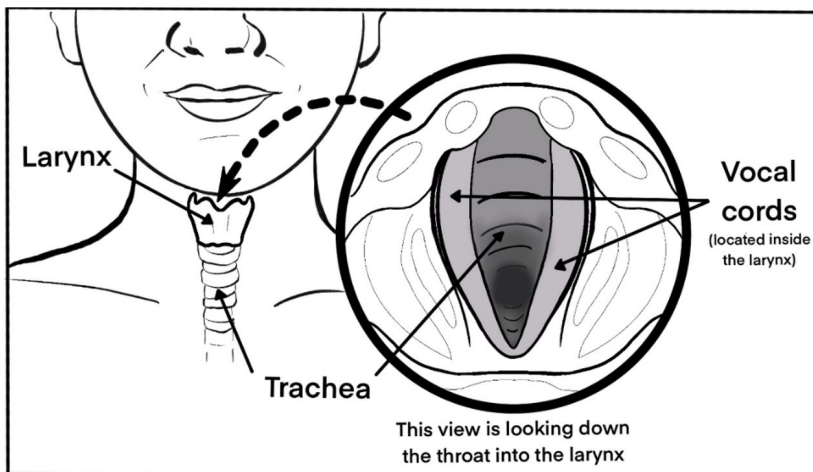
Inside your voice box are two vocal cords (also called vocalfolds). These:

- open when you breathe
- close when you swallow or speak.

They are muscles covered by a thin, delicate layer of tissue.

To produce your voice:

- The vocal cords come together gently
- Air from your lungs passes between them, making them vibrate and create sound
- This sound is then shaped into speech by your mouth, tongue, lips and teeth



What changes might happen?

Radiotherapy to the voice box or both sides of the neck can cause:

- Dryness.
- Swelling of the vocal cords.

This may lead to changes in your voice, such as it sounding hoarse, weak, or tired.

Recovery of your voice can vary from person to person, depending on the amount and area of treatment. For many people, these changes improve over time as the tissues heal.

Looking after your voice

The following tips can help protect your voice and support recovery:

Hydration

During radiotherapy, your team will encourage you to keep well hydrated. This may include drinks such as nutritional drinks provided by the team, tea or coffee. However, your voice benefits most from plain water, so aim to drink a few glasses of water each day as well.

Avoid straining your voice

If your voice feels tired, it's important to rest it. Try not to push through or force your voice. Whispering can also put extra strain on your voice box, so it's best to avoid this.

Steam inhalation

Breathing in steam from plain water (no oils needed) can help soothe and hydrate your voice box. It may also reduce irritation and help loosen thick mucus. Your team can provide a steam cup if needed.

Avoid dry or smoky environments

Dry air and smoke can irritate and dry out your voice box. Try to avoid these where possible. If you smoke, consider stopping, and speak to your team about support to help you with this.

Please speak to your Speech and Language Therapist if you have any concerns about your voice.

Swallowing exercises

As well as eating, drinking and swallowing, it is important to practise these exercises to keep your muscles moving and flexible during treatment.

Your Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) will show you these exercises. Start them as soon as you are able. Try to practise them regularly throughout the day in a way that feels manageable for you.

If the exercises become too uncomfortable, it is okay to stop completing them through treatment.

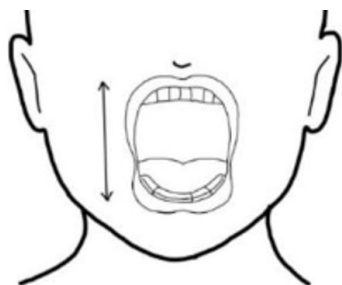
As you begin to recover from the immediate effects of radiotherapy, you will be encouraged to start the exercises again. This helps rebuild strength and supports your swallowing in the long term.

Jaw opening

Complete using the 7-7-7 rule.

Steps:

1. Open your mouth wide
2. Hold for 7 seconds
3. Relax
4. Repeat 7 times in a row



Tongue and hold manoeuvre

Do not complete with food or drink in the mouth.

Steps:

1. Place the tip of your tongue between front teeth.
2. Gently bite down on the tip of the tongue to hold it in place
3. Swallow saliva while keeping tongue in this position

Alternative: press tongue inside against teeth.

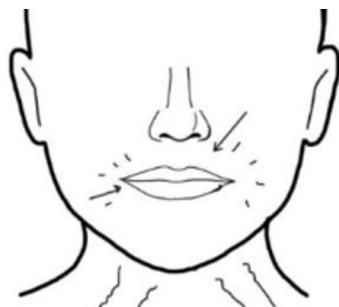


Effortful swallow

This is a useful technique if you are struggling to swallow tablets.

Steps:

1. Imagine you have a large mouthful of food
2. Swallow hard by squeezing all your muscles
3. Repeat 3 times

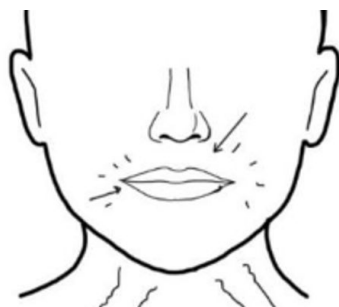


Voice box lift

Not to be completed during meals.

Steps:

1. Swallow saliva
2. Hold at the top
3. Feel your throat lift
4. Repeat 3 times



The following link will take you to a video of all the exercises being performed.

Please go to:

www.ouh.nhs.uk/cancer/videos

Click on 'Radiotherapy' and scroll down and click on 'Head and Neck'.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

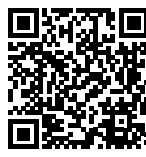
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