Swallowing Exercises for Patients with Head and Neck Cancer

It is important to do swallowing exercises each day to help keep or restore your ability to swallow. Start these exercises before you start radiation treatment and keep doing them during and after your treatment has ended.

Swallowing exercises help strengthen the muscles you use to swallow and prevent muscle loss (atrophy) and scarring. You may have some pain when you swallow or do these exercises. To reduce your pain when you swallow, it can help to take your pain medicine 20 to 30 minutes before you do the exercises.

Do not take food or liquid when you do these exercises. If your mouth is dry and it is hard for you to do the exercises, ask your speech therapist if you can take sips of fluid.

Do your exercises as directed by your speech therapist. If you have questions or trouble doing any of these exercises, talk with your speech therapist.

1. Masako Maneuver

   This exercise is done to help move food through your throat. You may have trouble swallowing solid foods and feel like food is “stuck” in your throat.
   
   • Place the tip of your tongue between your front teeth or gums. Hold gently and swallow, keeping your tongue between your teeth or gums.

   Do this exercise _____ times each day.
2. **Effortful Swallow**
   This exercise will help your swallowing muscles get stronger and increase your muscle flexibility and range of motion.
   - Swallow your saliva with extra effort, pushing your tongue against the roof of your mouth and swallowing hard.
   
   Do this exercise _____ times each day.

3. **Jaw Stretch**
   This exercise will help prevent trismus. Trismus is when your jaw muscles get tight and you have trouble opening your mouth. It is much easier to prevent trismus than fix it once it begins. Tight jaw muscles can make it hard to chew, swallow and talk. It can also make it hard to clean your teeth, gums and mouth or have dental work done. This is one of the easiest and most helpful exercises you can do.
   - Yawn and hold your mouth open as wide as you can for 5 seconds.
   
   Do this exercise _____ times each day.

4. **Tongue Pull-Back**
   This exercise helps with your tongue strength and range of motion.
   - Stick your tongue straight out and then pull it as far back in your mouth as you can. Hold it all the way back in your mouth for 2 seconds. Try to keep your tongue flat and do not curl it back.
   
   Do this exercise _____ times each day.

5. **Mendelsohn Maneuver**
   This exercise helps raise your larynx (voice box) and open your esophagus when you swallow. This helps keep food and liquid from going down the wrong way.
   - Swallow your saliva and feel your voice box lift, but do not let it drop. Hold it with your muscles for 1 to 2 seconds. Release and repeat.
   
   Do this exercise _____ times each day.