Maintaining Your Swallowing Function After Head and Neck Treatment
Head and Neck Cancer Survivors

Radiation and surgery to the head and neck can lead to long-term swallowing problems called dysphagia. Cancer survivors with dysphagia have a hard time swallowing food, liquid or saliva. Swallowing problems can occur during treatment, or may develop or continue long after radiation treatment has ended.

As part of your survivorship care, we want you to follow these recommendations to help reduce possible long-term swallowing problems after radiation. If you have any questions about these recommendations, please ask your speech pathologist.

Tips for Eating
You may feel solid foods stick abnormally in your throat while you eat. Although you may want to grab a drink to wash the food through the throat, try a hard, fast swallow instead to help clear the food. You may need to repeat this several times. It is good exercise for your throat when you swallow thick or heavy foods.

Swallowing Exercises
Below are exercises to help maintain your swallowing function. Do these daily.

Mendelsohn Exercise
- Put your fingers over the bulge at the front of your throat. This is sometimes called the Adam’s apple in men. Swallow, and feel the Adam’s apple lift and lower while you swallow.
- Now, as you swallow, hold the Adam’s apple up for at least three seconds by squeezing your throat muscles.
- Repeat this exercise five times.

Supraglottic Swallow
- Hold your breath tightly. Keep your breath held tight and swallow twice. Release your breath with a sharp cough, and swallow again.
- Repeat this exercise five times.

Masako Exercise
- Stick out your tongue and hold it between your lips or teeth and try to swallow. Do not pull
your tongue back in your mouth while you swallow.
- Repeat this exercise **five times**.

**Effortful Swallow**
- Swallow as hard as you can with food or saliva. Push as hard as you can with the tongue against the roof of your mouth while you swallow.
- Repeat this exercise **five times**.

**When to call us**
Sometimes, cancer survivors may develop new or have swallowing problems that get worse years after radiation treatment. Please call your head and neck team and your speech pathologist if it becomes more difficult to swallow over time. Although this is not a complete list, look for these changes:
- Unplanned weight loss
- Food sticks abnormally in your throat
- Takes longer to finish a meal
- Coughing, clearing your throat, or choking when you eat
- Avoiding certain foods because they are too difficult to eat
- Unexplained pneumonia, chest infections, fevers

**Reference**
