

Swallowing pills (tablets and capsules) - Patient information leaflet Children and younger adolescents

The Bottom Line - Pill anxiety is a big problem – here are some tips to help overcome it.

Has your child ever been prescribed a medication or vitamin but they refuse to take it? The fear of choking when trying to swallow pills is a very common phobia, especially in children. However, it can be made less of an issue for your child. Here are some simple techniques to help make swallowing pills easier.

A Little Background

When a person fears swallowing a pill, the body uses its fight-or-flight survival mechanism and begins to tense up. This tensing goes throughout the body, including the throat, neck and chest. This tensing of these muscles may make the person feel like they're having trouble breathing which may, in itself, cause further anxiety.

This muscle tensing, may feel very uncomfortable, but is not harmful. You should reassure your child of this and that they will not choke on their pill. Get them to relax so that swallowing their pill becomes easier.

Breaking or crushing pills

The first and perhaps simplest technique is a small step to swallowing whole pills. You can divide or crush tablets or sometimes open capsules which will make them much easier to swallow. If you crush the tablet or open the capsule you can put them in soft foods like pudding or yogurt or in flavourful drink. By dividing tablets in half or quarters, it will make the size more manageable to swallow.

However, it is very important that you talk with your child's doctor or your pharmacist before you crush or divide their pills. Some pills are time-released which means that the medication is released into the body over time. Not swallowing it whole could make the pill less effective or release too much medicine all at once.

Swallowing Techniques

This is the most crucial and positive step. Learning to swallow effectively will cut down significantly on pill anxiety. The (incorrect) technique that is most often used to swallow medication is to throw the pills towards the back of their throat. This actually makes swallowing more difficult. Instead, teach your child to place the pill on their tongue, which is a more natural and simpler way of swallow. After all, they do not throw food to the back of their mouth.

First have them take a medium sip of water to moisten their throat. Then, have the child place the pill onto the tip of their tongue and take another sip of water. Then, instead of letting them tilt or throw their head backwards, which many people do, instruct them to tilt their chin slightly downwards towards their chest. This will cause the pill to float towards the back of their mouth, making swallowing feel more natural as gravity will do most of the work. Remember, when your child normally eats they sit looking down at the plate and have no trouble swallowing. It is unnatural to tip the head back.

Once the pill is swallowed past the throat, the child should swallow several mouthfuls of fluid to carry it quickly to the stomach. A piece of soft fruit, like banana, can also be eaten to push the pill down.

If after trying these simple techniques your child is still having problems swallowing, please read the information overleaf or speak to your doctor and they can give you more advice on helping your child learn to swallow pills.

If you require this document in an alternative format, ie easy read, large text, audio, Braille or a community language please contact the Pharmacy Team on 01243 623349 (Text Relay calls welcome).

Teaching children how to swallow pills (tablets and capsules)

A guide for parents, caregivers and children over 4 years – Patient information leaflet

Swallowing

We teach children not to swallow anything until it has been completely chewed and not to put strange objects in their mouths. Therefore, it is only natural that they think they can't or shouldn't swallow a pill. Also, some people have narrow throats, sensitive palates or a very strong gag reflex, which initially makes swallowing hard tablets and capsules uncomfortable.

The plan

By starting with small sweets that are easy to swallow and slowly increasing to a larger size, children can learn to become comfortable swallowing tablets and capsules whole.

You will need

1. Small sweets that can be cut up, e.g. jelly tots
2. Flavoured yoghurt or ready-to-eat dairy pudding
3. Juice or milk
4. Plastic knife, spoon and plate

Keep this in mind

- Make this a fun, relaxed exercise
- Keep sessions short so your child doesn't become tired and stressed.
- Give plenty of praise for all your child's successes along the way. Even little steps are important.
- If there is little progress, talk with the medical caregiver; be flexible and do not discourage the child.
- Keep all medicines out of reach of children.

What to do

1. Give your child some control. Go shopping together for the food and let your child choose the yoghurt or pudding flavours.
2. Allow your child to cut the jelly tots into very small pieces and put them in the yoghurt or pudding. Ask your child to swallow them with the yoghurt or pudding.
3. Encourage your child to swallow the pieces of jelly tots without chewing. Then suggest that this may be done more easily if the jelly tot is moved toward the back of the throat with food.
4. Once the child can swallow small pieces, demonstrate cutting them a little bigger and repeat.
5. Once your child has mastered average tablet-sized pieces of jelly tot, thin out the yoghurt or pudding with a little milk and encourage the child to practice this.
6. Continue until your child feels comfortable and then try swallowing with water.
7. If necessary, buy some small empty gelatin capsules at a pharmacy. Practice each day with these capsules, swallowing them with water. Allow your child to handle them, pull them apart or chew them. They may even like to fill them with sprinkles before taking them.
8. As progress is made, buy some larger sized empty gelatin capsules to practice with.
9. Have your child swallow a vitamin tablet daily to keep in practice, but make sure they are especially made and sold for your child's age group.

Other helpful points

- When learning to swallow, use slightly warm rather than cold water as this helps to relax the throat.
- Mask bitter or strong flavours with ice cubes, licorice, fruit or chocolate.
- Any jelly-type sweet can be used.
- Substitute apple puree for yoghurt or pudding, if preferred.