

Swallowing pills (tablets and capsules) - Patient information leaflet

Why can pills be hard to swallow?

There can be lots of reasons why tablets or capsules (solid oral medicines) may be difficult to swallow. Some people just gag at the thought of swallowing a tablet or capsule; others have a dry mouth, whilst some patients have illnesses or are taking medications which can affect swallowing.

The fear of choking when trying to swallow pills is a common phobia. However, it can be made less of an issue. Below are some simple techniques to help make swallowing pills easier.

A little background on pill anxiety

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 it is not harmful.

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 doctor or your pharmacist before you crush or divide any 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 significantly reduce pill anxiety. The (incorrect) technique that is most often used to swallow medication is to throw the pills towards the back of the throat. This actually makes swallowing more difficult. Instead, teach yourself or the person you care for to place the pill on the tongue, which is a more natural and simpler way of swallow. After all, you do not throw food to the back of the mouth.

First take a medium sip of water to moisten the throat. Then, place the pill onto the tip of the tongue and take another sip of water. Then, instead of tilting or throwing the head backwards, which many people do, tilt the chin slightly downwards towards the chest. This will cause the pill to float towards the back of the mouth, making swallowing feel more natural as gravity will do most of the work. Remember, when you normally eat you 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, you should swallow several mouthfuls of fluid to ensure it carries on quickly to the stomach. If after trying these simple techniques you are still having problems swallowing, more information on a step-by step approach to help you learn to swallow tablets and capsules can be found overleaf.

If you require this document in another format such as large print or audio or in another community language, please contact the Communications Team on 01903 843129 or email info@sussexpartnership.nhs.uk

Teaching adults how to swallow pills (tablets and capsules)

A guide for adults – Patient information leaflet

Why not prescribe me a liquid preparation or a tablet that dissolves in the mouth?

The reason we want to minimize the use of liquids and orodispersible tablets (tablets that dissolve in the mouth) is because they usually cost a lot more than ordinary tablets and capsules. By avoiding this extra cost, the money can then be spent on other NHS services that could not otherwise be afforded. The other problem with liquids is they need to be measured on a spoon or in a special syringe. This can lead to poor measuring and the wrong dose being given. Taking a tablet or capsule ensures the correct dose is given.

Swallowing

We are taught as children not to swallow anything until it has been completely chewed and not to put strange objects in our mouths. Therefore, for some adults this training as children can make it feel that 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, you 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

What to do

1. Cut the jelly tots into smaller pieces and put them into yoghurt or pudding. Swallow them with the yoghurt or pudding.
2. Try to swallow the pieces of jelly tots without chewing. This may be done more easily if the jelly tot is moved toward the back of the throat with food.
3. Once you can swallow smaller pieces, cut them a little bigger and repeat.
4. Once you have mastered average tablet-sized pieces of jelly tot, thin out the yoghurt or pudding with a little milk and continue to practice this.
5. Continue until you feel comfortable and then try swallowing with water.
6. If necessary, buy some small empty gelatin capsules at a pharmacy. Practice each day with these capsules, swallowing them with water.
7. As progress is made, buy some larger sized empty gelatin capsules for practising.
8. Try swallowing a vitamin tablet daily to keep in practice if you do not take a tablet or capsule daily already.

Other helpful points

- When swallowing, 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 to practice with.
- Substitute apple puree for yoghurt or pudding, if preferred.