

Swallowing Difficulties (Dysphagia)

People with cancer may have dysphagia (difficulty swallowing foods or liquids) due to mouth or throat sores caused by cancer treatments or by cancer of the head or neck. They may find it painful to chew foods that are hard or rough, and they may be unable to swallow thin liquids (like water) without coughing or choking. If you are affected by any of these problems, changes to the texture and consistency of the foods you eat and the liquids you drink may be helpful.

Your doctor may refer you to a registered dietitian (RD) or speech-language pathologist (SLP). These specialists can recommend the best diet and fluid consistency for you. The SLP can also teach you exercises and positions to improve your swallowing ability.

A Word of Caution

If you cough or choke when you eat, contact your doctor right away, especially if you also have a fever.

Tips to Manage Swallowing Difficulties

- Talk with your health care team! Let them know if you have a hard time swallowing food or drinks.
- Follow the advice of your SLP and RD about eating softer foods or liquid foods.
- Eat three to five small meals each day.

- Consume liquid nutritional drinks if you can't eat enough solid foods at meals.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups of fluid each day. If necessary, thicken beverages and other liquids so they are easier to swallow. (See the following chart for types of thickeners you can use.)

Types of Thickeners

Thickener	Description and Instructions for Use
Gelatin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forms a soft gel that can make it easier to swallow foods like cakes, cookies, crackers, sandwiches, pureed fruits, and other cold foods. Gelatin helps keep crumbs and foods together and may help prevent coughing caused by loose bits of food. • Mix 1 tablespoon unflavored gelatin in 2 cups liquid until dissolved and pour over food. (Depending on the type of gelatin you use, the liquid may need to be hot or cold. Follow package directions.) Allow food to sit until it is saturated.
Tapioca, flour, or cornstarch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will thicken liquids to different consistencies. • First, add tapioca, flour, or cornstarch to cool water. Then mix the thickener into the liquid before heating so the thickener can dissolve.
Pureed vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used to thicken soups, but can alter the flavor. • Add as needed to reach desired consistency.
Dry infant cereal, instant potatoes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used to thicken soups, but can alter the flavor. • Useful when a very thick cereal product is needed. • Add as needed to reach desired consistency.
Commercial thickeners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fluid's consistency can be adjusted depending on the amount of thickener used. • Commercial thickeners can be found in pharmacies. • Follow the instructions on the label.

Diets and Liquids for People with Swallowing Difficulties

Two diets used by people with swallowing difficulties are the Pureed Diet and the Mechanical Soft Diet. Use the diet recommended to you by your RD or SLP. Also follow the RD's or SLP's advice about the consistency of liquids that will be safest for you to swallow.

Pureed Diet

Food Group	Foods Allowed
High-protein foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk • Yogurt without fruit • Cottage cheese • Sour cream • Pureed meat, poultry, and fish • Casseroles • Soft scrambled eggs
Breads, cereals, rice, and pasta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slurried* breads as tolerated • Cooked cereals, such as cream of wheat or cream of rice • Pureed pasta or rice
Fruits and vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pureed fruit and vegetables without seeds or skins • Mashed potatoes • Juices and nectars
Condiments, beverages, and desserts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrups or honey • Butter or margarine • Spices • Milkshakes • Custard or pudding • Slurried* cakes or cookies as tolerated

*A slurry is a thickener dissolved in a liquid. A slurried bread or cake has a thickened liquid poured on top to make it easier to swallow.

Mechanical Soft Diet

Food Group

Foods Allowed

High-protein foods

- Milk
 - Yogurt
 - Cheeses
 - Sour cream
 - All types of cooked eggs
 - Ground meats and ground meat casseroles
 - Fish
 - Sandwiches made with ground meats or spreads
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Breads, cereals, rice, and pasta

- Soft breads
 - Pancakes and waffles
 - Graham crackers
 - Soft, cold cereals in milk
 - Pasta
 - Rice
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Fruits and vegetables

- Bananas
 - Canned fruit
 - Soft, well-cooked or pureed vegetables
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Condiments, beverages, and desserts

- Syrups and honey
 - Butter and margarine
 - Spices
 - Fluids
 - Soft desserts that do not require much chewing, such as ice cream, sherbet, flavored gelatin, pudding, custard, soft cakes, or soft cookies
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Liquid Categories

Category	Consistency	Examples
Thin liquids	Pours like water	Coffee, tea, soft drinks, milk, thin cream soup, broth, liquid supplements, ice cream, sherbet, Italian ice, milkshakes
Nectar-thick liquids	Similar to consistency of tomato juice when stirred	Apricot, peach, or pear nectar; tomato juice
Honey-thick liquids	Pours slowly, similar to consistency of honey when stirred	Commercially thickened honey-thick liquids