

Difficulty Swallowing

What is it?

Radiation therapy can cause eating and swallowing difficulties, also called *dysphagia*. This is more likely to develop if you receive radiation to your head, neck, esophagus, or gastrointestinal tract. Major complications include weight loss and nutritional deficiencies. You may also experience severe dry mouth, called *xerostomia*, which can also make eating and swallowing difficult. *Trismus*, the inability to open your mouth widely because of decreased elasticity of the muscles around your mouth, may also result in chewing difficulties.

What are the symptoms?

- Pain when you swallow
- Difficulty swallowing
- Feeling like there is a lump in your throat
- Weight loss
- Scant, sticky, and thick saliva
- Mouth pain

How is it diagnosed?

This condition is primarily diagnosed after a thorough examination of your mouth and throat as well as a description of your symptoms. To confirm a diagnosis, your doctor may order an endoscopy, in which a thin tube with a camera at the end is snaked down your throat and esophagus to check for blockages.

How is it treated?

A variety of treatments may help ease your discomfort and improve eating and swallowing:

- Swallowing therapy, in which a speech pathologist helps you learn to swallow again.
- Exercises to help you chew.
- Devices to expand mouth movement, such as Therabite and E-Z Flex.
- A procedure to stretch the esophagus.
- A feeding tube if you're losing a lot of weight and/or in danger of becoming malnourished.



TIPS

Tips to Help

The following may also ease your discomfort and help you maintain your weight:

- Keep your throat moist with a throat spray, artificial saliva preparations, or cough drops.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless candy to keep your mouth and throat moist.
- Keep the room where you sleep moist with a vaporizer.
- Drink at least six to eight glasses of fluids a day.
- Don't wear tight-fitting clothing around your neck.
- Eat slowly, and chew your food thoroughly.
- Try liquid nutritional supplements or pureed foods.
- Avoid very hot or very cold foods.
- Eat six to eight small meals throughout the day to avoid feeling too full and nauseated.

Words to Know

Dysphagia: Difficulty swallowing.

Endoscopy: Diagnostic test in which a thin tube with a camera at the end is snaked down the throat and esophagus to check for blockages.

Trismus: The inability to open the mouth widely because of decreased elasticity of the muscles around the mouth, which makes it difficult to chew.

Xerostomia: Severe dry mouth.