

## Swallowing During Radiation Treatment Head and Neck Patients

Head and neck radiation can lead to swallowing problems called **dysphagia**. It makes it hard to swallow food, liquid and saliva. Swallowing problems can occur during and after treatment. They can also occur and last long after radiation treatment is done.

You **actively** use the mouth, throat, and voice box (larynx) muscles when you swallow to push food, liquid, and saliva down into the food pipe (esophagus). As your muscles push it down, your voice box closes to keep the things you swallow from going into the wind pipe (trachea) and lungs. Swallowing is a complex task and is done all through muscle movements.

It may prevent or lessen the effects of long-term dysphagia if you keep swallowing muscles **active** during radiation. This may help maintain muscle function.

### Watch for Swallowing Problems

There are signs that may alert you and your health care team to swallowing problems. Tell your health care team **right away** if you have any of these signs during radiation treatment:

- Coughing or choking when you eat and drink
- Unable to eat or drink at all or you start to use a feeding tube for all of your nutritional intake
- Develop symptoms of chest infection or pneumonia, such as fever or a cough that produces mucus (phlegm)