

Difficulty swallowing tablets

How carers, nurses and family can support patients with tablets

What is the issue?

- Some people find it difficult or uncomfortable to swallow tablets or capsules;
- This is common and not considered a swallowing problem.

Why does it happen?

- Tablets vary in size which can make some more difficult to manage than others;
- Anxiety or fear can contribute to the problem;
- A dry mouth reduces how easily tablets slide down;
- Changes in posture and muscle strength and coordination may have an impact (e.g. with age, illness, or tiredness).

Many people manage well with the right approach and reassurance.

What helps:

1. Posture and positioning:

- Ensure the patient is sitting upright at 90°;
- Head should be slightly forward, not tipped back;
- Keep the patient upright for 10–30 minutes after taking their tablets.

2. Habits and reminders:

- Explain each step calmly and clearly;
- Check the patient's preferences, do they prefer to take their tablet with food or drink;
- Allow plenty of time;
- Give only one tablet or capsule at a time.

3. Mouth care before medication:

- Ensure the mouth is clean and moist
- Offer a sip of fluid before taking medication as this can help prevent them from sticking in the mouth or throat.

4. Practical tablet-swallowing techniques:

- Place the tablet in the middle of the tongue, not on the tip;
- Some patients manage better taking tablets with yoghurt / purée, thicker drinks e.g., a smoothie;
- Encourage patients to take a drink of water after they have swallowed their tablet to help oesophageal clearance;
- Patients who are on IDDSI thickened drinks must take their tablets with the appropriate level.

5. Medication adaptations:

- Check with pharmacy if tablets can be modified:
 - Crushed
 - Split
- Also discuss alternative forms, such as:
 - Liquids
 - Dispersible tablets
 - Patches
 - Smaller tablets or capsule shape

What to avoid:

- ✗ Tilting the head backwards;
- ✗ Giving multiple tablets at once;
- ✗ Rushing the patient;
- ✗ Crushing tablets without checking.

Key reassurance for staff:

- Difficulty swallowing tablets is common;
- Small changes in approach can make a big difference;
- Stay calm, observe closely, and follow individualised plans;
- If unsure, pause and seek advice.

Author: Speech and Language Therapy Team

Date created: July 2026

Expiry date: July 2029