

How to Swallow Tablets



Many people find tablets hard to swallow, but with practice nearly everyone will be able to do so. This leaflet gives ideas for both children and adults to help learn this skill. Children can usually start to learn this from about five years old.

Why is it useful to be able to swallow tablets?

Being able to swallow tablets is useful as some medications are not made in a syrup or soluble form. If you can swallow tablets it is usually much easier and quicker than measuring out syrups.

Tablets are also much easier than bottles of syrups to take out with you or on holiday etc. Some medicine syrups are very expensive or difficult to obtain. Some tablets can be crushed up to make swallowing easier but others do not work properly if not swallowed whole (your pharmacist can advise you).

Tablets, capsules, caplets, gelcaps and pills are all names for medicines which come in a form intended to be swallowed whole. We are using the word tablet to mean any of these.

Practice with sweets and cake decorations

It is best to practice with these as they will taste better if they get stuck and you can try lots of times!

Buy a variety of small cake decorations or sweets which are smaller or the same size as the tablet you need. Soft sweets such as Jelly Tots[®] can be used and cut into different sizes. Some people will need to start with something as small as a 'hundred and thousand' decoration, others can start with sugar pearl ball decorations and others with Tic-tac's[®].

Once a Tic-tac[®] or larger sweet can be swallowed whole you can move on to trying an actual tablet. Remember to look after your teeth if having all these sweets!

How to swallow tablets: first steps

- First look in a mirror and open your mouth really wide. Tablets are much smaller than the hole at the back of your mouth. They are also smaller than the bits of chewed food such as meat or potato which can easily be swallowed down.
- There are several ways of learning to take tablets. Different methods work for different people.
- Always have a small drink or amount of wet food first to make sure the mouth is moist before trying to take a tablet.

- Have a glass of water or other drink to hand in case it is needed to help the tablet go down and to get rid of any taste.
- Always use cold or room temperature drinks or foods, never hot, as this may make the tablet dissolve before its swallowed. You can try fizzy drinks as some people find this works better.
- Try putting your chin down or just put the head back slightly. Tipping the head back a lot can make it more difficult to swallow.

‘Tricks’ to help you learn to swallow the practice sweets or tablets

- Take a sip of drink, put the sweet or tablet towards the back of the tongue and then take a further sip of drink and swallow. Gradually try larger sweets.
- Put the sweet or tablet on the tongue and then drink from a bottle (the sort that water or fizzy drinks come in) rather than a glass. Seal your mouth around the bottle to drink.
- Put the sweet or tablet on the tongue and then drink through a large straw (the type used for milk shakes etc).

More ideas

- Put the tablet on a spoon with a small quantity of yoghurt, chocolate sauce, fruit puree or similar pudding. Swallow the tablet with the spoonful of food. (Check with your pharmacist or doctor if it is OK to have the tablet with food).
- Try chewing a small piece of bread – just before swallowing it pop the tablet in your mouth and swallow it down together.
- Put the tablet on the tongue and then suck a ‘squeezey’ pouch of yoghurt or fruit puree and swallow.
- Older children and adults may find that sticking their tongue out, putting the tablet far back on the tongue and then closing their mouth (without a drink) can work well. Initially the aim is to get used to not gagging rather than trying to swallow the tablet. With time it can be swallowed whole.
- Take a deep breath and hold it until after putting a tablet on the tongue. Then swallow the tablet with a drink. Holding your breath may reduce the gag reflex.

Further information:

There are many resources on the internet giving ideas and tips about swallowing tablets. www.pillswallowing.com is a website entirely about how to learn to swallow tablets, set up by two doctors in the USA.

Good Luck!