

5 Steps for Regaining Swallowing After Stroke

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Sometimes stroke can impair your ability to swallow. This condition is known as **dysphagia**, and it can be very scary and frustrating to deal with.

To help with this, we will share 5 steps for regaining swallowing after stroke. While the condition sometimes goes away on its own, it's best to be proactive about this **stroke side effect**.

Before we dig into the steps, we will quickly fill you in on what dysphagia involves.

Regaining Swallowing After Stroke

Movement impairments are one of the most common stroke side effects. For example, many stroke survivors are left with difficulty moving their arm or leg. These impairments aren't restricted to your major muscles, though. Sometimes stroke impairs your ability to use the muscles in your mouth and throat that are used for swallowing. In order to regain your ability to swallow after stroke, you need to retrain your oral muscles to work properly.

Retraining the Brain

You can achieve this through repetitive practice that activates neuroplasticity and rewires the brain. (This is the same concept as retraining your arm or leg to move again.) The more you practice using your muscles, the better your brain gets at controlling and coordinating those muscles. By repetitively practicing swallowing exercises, you can retrain your brain to control the muscles necessary for swallowing.

This brings us to step 1:

Step 1: Work with a Speech-Language Pathologist

A speech-language pathologist is someone who is highly trained in speech disorders – which includes swallowing problems. While swallowing doesn't involve talking, it is lumped into the category of speech because it involves your oral muscles. A speech-language pathologist will be able to assess your unique conditions and tailor a unique rehabilitation program for you.

This is important because every stroke is different and everyone will require a different rehabilitation program.

Step 2: Practice Swallowing Exercises

Once your SLP sets you up with swallowing exercises (<https://www.verywell.com/swallowing-exercises-3146018>), it's time to get practicing! The more repetitions you complete, the faster you will improve. Repetition helps your brain rewire itself.

Ask your SLP to send you home with some homework so that you can keep up with your swallowing exercises at home. It's best if you can both practice with your SLP regularly and practice daily at home in between sessions. The more reps you can consistently accomplish, the better you will get at swallowing.

Step 3: Try Some Aphasia Apps

Along with your homework from your SLP, you can try using aphasia apps that include swallowing exercises.

For example, the Lingraphica SmallTalk Oral Motor Exercises app (<https://aphasia.com/smalltalk-apps/>) contains lots of exercises to help improve swallowing after stroke. You can practice these on your own at home in between visits to your SLP.

Step 4: Explore E-Stim

If you want to really speed your results along, you can try adding electrical stimulation to your regimen. Yes, this involves delivering gentle electrical impulses to the skin around your throat, but don't worry! It's gentle. Electrical stimulation works by delivering gentle electrical impulses to your muscles. This sends a signal to your brain that goes something like, "Hey there are muscles here! Let's work on moving them!" Using electrical stimulation alongside rehab exercises can help boost your results. (Tip: To get an e-stim device for your throat, you often need a healthcare professional to order it for you.)

Step 5: Boost Your Safety with Compensation Techniques

Although repetitive practice is the fastest way to regain your ability to swallow after stroke, results will still take time.

In the meantime, it's important to protect your safety by minimizing your risk of choking or having silent aspirations –breathing foreign objects into your airways – usually, it's food, saliva, or stomach contents when you swallow, vomit or experience heartburn.

(<https://www.healthline.com/health/aspiration#causes>).

Here are some tips that can help:

- **Eat soft foods** – they're easier to chew
- **Drink thick liquids** – it moves slower than thin liquids and reduces your chance of choking
- **Focus on sitting up straight** – and definitely don't lie down while eating!
- **Eat slowly** – this greatly reduces your risk of choking
- **Avoid foods of varying consistencies** like chunky soup – this is complicated and unsafe to eat with dysphagia

These compensation techniques can help protect your safety while you continue with your rehabilitation. As you slowly regain your ability to swallow after stroke, make sure that someone is around as you begin to eat new foods. Your safety is of the utmost importance!