

Managing Eating and Drinking when Breathing is Difficult

This information sheet is for people who are experiencing difficulties with eating and/or drinking due to breathlessness.

Breathing problems are very common in people who have heart and lung conditions or some types of cancer.

Feeling breathless when eating

- Breathing can sometimes be more difficult during or after eating a meal. Try eating smaller meals and snacks more often to see if this helps
- Try softer, moist foods that are easier to swallow. Add plenty of sauce or gravy to meals. Cooking casseroles or using a slow cooker which tenderises foods can reduce the need to chew, which can make eating and breathing easier
- Try having more nourishing liquids such as milk, smoothies, juice and fortified soups
- Eat while sitting upright, preferably at a table, as slumping can cause pressure on your diaphragm and make breathing more difficult

Feeling tired

Tiredness can be a common symptom in many conditions especially when you are experiencing breathlessness too.

- Take time when you eat. Aim to rest before and after meals
- Where possible, let other people prepare food
- Try ready meals or easy to prepare meals (e.g. cheese/beans/sardines/scrambled egg on toast, jacket potatoes with fillings, tinned macaroni cheese or other tinned pasta) if you need to prepare food yourself
- When cooking, try to cook extra portions which you can freeze and use at a later date
- Try and get someone to help with shopping and cooking, to conserve energy. If it is difficult to get help, stock up on non-perishable foods such as frozen, canned or dried foods. Use delivery services and internet shopping where possible
- Keep your fridge stocked with easy to eat snacks such as full fat yoghurts, mousses, trifles and cheese/savoury snacks
- Try having your main meal at lunchtime if you are less tired earlier in the day

Feeling bloated

- If you are breathless, you may gulp air when you eat. A build-up of air in the stomach is common and can make you feel full and bloated
- Take your time eating and drinking
- Try to limit fizzy drinks and foods that are more likely to produce more gas such as beans, cabbage, sprouts and onions
- Avoid wearing clothing that is tight around your stomach
- Try using peppermint. It can be taken as a tea, a cordial or a capsule
- Try to be as physically active as you can

Dry mouth

A dry mouth can be caused by breathing through your mouth, taking some inhaled medications and using oxygen. If your mouth is dry, you will not have as much saliva, which is needed to help your taste buds work and help with chewing and swallowing.

- After using inhalers, remember to rinse your mouth out and gargle with water
- Use regular mouth care and mouth washes to reduce your risk of mouth infection. Avoid using mouthwash that contains alcohol, as this can dry out your mouth
- Try to have plenty of liquids and moist foods. Choose foods with plenty of sauce or gravy
- Sugar free mints, sugar free chewing gum, lozenges or lemon drops can help to moisten your mouth and stimulate your taste buds
- Try ice cubes and ice lollies to help moisten your mouth
- Try rinsing your mouth with still or sparkling water before eating
- Discuss artificial saliva options with your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or dietitian. Sprays, gels and pastilles are available

A common mouth infection called oral thrush (candidiasis) can cause a coating on your tongue and contribute to loss of or altered tastes and a dry mouth. It can also make chewing and swallowing more uncomfortable. Speak to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or dietitian if you are concerned.

Taste changes

A dry mouth can also affect your taste

- Use seasonings and herbs like rosemary, basil and mint, and spices to add extra flavour to your food
- Try marinating meat in fruit juices or wine, or dress it in strong sauces like sweet and sour, curry or chilli. Cold meats may taste better garnished with pickle or chutney
- Sharp-tasting foods like fresh fruit e.g. pineapple and fruit juices are refreshing and can leave a pleasant taste in the mouth. Freshly cut pineapple can help to clean the mouth due to its rough texture
- Concentrate on eating the foods that you like the taste of and ignore those that do not appeal to you. However, do try them again after a few weeks, as this may change with time

Fluid intake

- Having enough fluid can help to clear mucus. Being well hydrated makes mucus (sputum or secretions) less sticky. This can help you clear your chest as coughing is easier
- Aim for at least 6-8 glasses or mugs of fluid per day. Sipping fluids throughout the day can help you achieve this

Fact or fiction? Milk and mucus

You might worry if you drink milk or eat cheese or yoghurt that you will produce more or thicker mucus. There is not enough scientific evidence to support this. Thick mucus is likely due to not drinking enough fluids.

- Dairy foods are good sources of calcium, which is important in preventing osteoporosis (fragile bones). People taking steroids for a long time to reduce inflammation of their airways can be at an increased risk of developing osteoporosis. Dairy foods are also good sources of protein
- Try rinsing your mouth and drinking a little water or fruit juice after drinking or eating milk products, if you don't like the mouth feel afterwards

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