



Medications and Swallowing Problems



Some medications can cause or worsen swallowing problems (may be known as dysphagia, a medical word that means difficulty swallowing). Using multiple medications together can also make swallowing more difficult.

Important: Never stop or start a medication without talking to the health care provider.

It is important to be aware of how medications may impact swallowing. Paying attention to medications and whether they impact swallowing can provide information to the health care provider to determine what medications should be used or not used. The health care provider is the decision-maker, together with the individual, about what medications should be taken or not, depending on the benefits and risks of any medication.

Never stop or start a medication without talking to the health care provider.

Some medicines can cause swallowing problems.

These problems may happen when the muscles used for swallowing do not work well. When this happens, a person may have more saliva than usual.

Other medicines can cause a dry mouth. A dry mouth can make swallowing harder. To help, always offer a sip of liquid before giving medicine.

Make sure the medicine is swallowed completely. If medicine is not swallowed all the way, it can cause throat irritation, burning, or more saliva.

If a person has a swallowing problem, it is extremely important to work with the health care provider that prescribed the medication to plan for safe medication administration.

Never stop or start a medication without talking to the health care provider.

The health care provider may suggest things like crushing pills or mixing them with a little food. Thickening agents are sometimes used to thicken liquids. This makes medication thicker but can also lower how well the body absorbs the medication. If someone needs thickened liquids, they should talk to their speech-language pathologist or health care provider to find the safest way to take the medication.

NOTE: For more information about different medications and how they may impact swallowing, please see the next pages. These medications are important for a person's health, and while they may affect swallowing in some individuals, remember...

Never stop or start a medication without talking to the health care provider.

Specific Swallowing Concerns That May Be Caused by Medications

Condition: Xerostomia (Dry Mouth)

Dry mouth, also called xerostomia, is a common side effect of many medications. It can make swallowing harder because there isn't enough moisture to move food through the mouth and throat. Dry mouth can also affect the salivary glands. These glands help protect the digestive tract and reduce acid in the esophagus.

The medications listed below are important for a person's health. While they may cause problems with swallowing in some individuals, they should never be stopped without speaking to the health care provider first.

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
Anticholinergic Agents (Medications that slow down certain messages from the brain to body systems).	Benzotropine (Cogentin) Dicyclomine (Bentyl)
Antidepressants, including SSRIs/SNRIs (Medications that help people feel less sad and more emotionally balanced)	Citalopram (Celexa) Fluoxetine (Prozac) Fluvoxamine (Luvox) Paroxetine (Paxil) Sertraline (Zoloft)
Antiemetics (nausea medications) (Medications that help stop nausea and vomiting)	Meclizine (Antivert) Metoclopramide (Reglan) Prochlorperazine (Compazine)
Antihistamines and decongestants (treat allergy and cold symptoms)	Chlorpheniramine (Chlor-Trimeton) Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed)
Blood pressure and cardiac medications (medications for the heart)	Amlodipine (Norvasc) Captopril (Capoten) Lisinopril (Prinivil, Zestril)
Diuretics (remove excess fluid and are sometimes called a "water pill")	Bumetanide (Bumex), Ethacrynic acid (Edecrin), Furosemide (Lasix)

Concern: Abnormal Involuntary Movements & Dry Mouth

Some medications used to treat mental health conditions can cause unusual, involuntary movements. These are movements that a person cannot control. These movements can affect the arms and legs, as well as the muscles used for eating, drinking, and swallowing saliva.

The medications listed below are important for a person's health. While they may cause problems with swallowing in some individuals; they should never be stopped without speaking to the health care provider first.

These medications help calm the brain when thoughts or feelings feel too big or confusing. These medications can also be used to help when people are hearing or seeing things that aren't there or believing things that aren't true.

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
Chlorpromazine (Thorazine)	Olanzapine (Zyprexa)
Clozapine (Clozaril)	Quetiapine (Seroquel)
Haloperidol (Haldol)	Risperidone (Risperdal)
Lithium (Eskalith, Lithobid)	Thioridazine (Mellaril)
Loxapine (Adusuve, Loxitane)	Trifluoperazine (Stelazine)

Concern: Esophageal Injury

Some medications can weaken the lower esophageal sphincter (LES). This is a muscle at the bottom of the esophagus where it connects to the stomach. This muscle opens to let food or liquid into the stomach and then closes to keep stomach contents from coming back up. If the LES gets weak, it can cause problems like heartburn, regurgitation (food and liquid coming back up), and “wet burps.”

The medications discussed below are important for a person's health, and while they may cause problems with swallowing in some individuals, they should never be stopped without speaking to the health care provider first.

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
Anticholinergics (Medications that help calm parts of the body by blocking some nerve messages)	Benztropine (Cogentin) Dicyclomine (Bentyl)
Antidepressants	Amitriptyline Imipramine (Tofranil) Nortriptyline (Pamelor)
Antihistamines (Allergy Medication)	Diphenhydramine (Benadryl)
Asthma Medication	Albuterol (ProAir HFA, Proventil HFA, Ventolin HFA) Theophylline (Elixophyllin, Theochron, Uniphyll)
Bisphosphonates (Used to treat Osteoporosis) are medications that help keep bones from getting weak or breaking easily.	Alendronate (Fosamax) Risedronate (Actonel)
Blood Pressure and Cardiac Medications	Amlodipine (Norvasc) Metoprolol (Lorpressor) Propranolol (Inderal)
Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) are used to treat pain, arthritis, and fever.	Aspirin

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
	Ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), Naproxen (Aleve)
Supplements	Potassium Chloride Iron Supplements
Sedatives (Medications that help calm the body and brain, especially when someone is very nervous or can't sleep)	Clonazepam (Klonopin) Lorazepam (Ativan) Propofol (Diprivan)

Concern: Loss of Sensation

Local anesthetics used for dental work or to numb a sore throat can cause temporary numbness.

This may make it hard to feel food, liquids, or their saliva, which can lead to choking until the medication wears off.

The medications discussed below are important for a person's health, and while they may cause problems with swallowing in some individuals, they should never be stopped without speaking to the health care provider first.

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
Novocain is a medication used to numb an area, so you don't feel pain during a procedure.	Procaine
Chloraseptic is a spray or lozenge that helps make your throat feel numb so it hurts less.	Cepocol
Xylocaine (Xylocaine is a medication used to numb an area, so you don't feel pain during a test or procedure.)	Benzocaine Oral Lozenges (Mucinex)

Concern: Drug Toxicity

Some medications have a narrow safety range, which means even small changes in dose or blood levels can make them toxic.

Signs of drug toxicity may include being less alert, muscle weakness, poor coordination, and confusion. These problems can make swallowing unsafe.

Certain seizure medications (anticonvulsants) that affect mood and behavior (psychotropic drugs) fall into this group.

Because of this, people taking these medicines need regular blood tests to make sure the drug levels stay safe and effective.

The medications discussed below are important for a person's health, and while they may cause problems with swallowing in some individuals, they should never be stopped without speaking to the health care provider first.

These medicines help keep the brain calm and working smoothly.

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
Carbamazepine (Tegretol)	Phenobarbital (Luminal, Solfonton)
Divalproex (Depakote)	Phenytoin (Dilantin)
Lithium (Carbolith, Eskalith, Lithobid)	Valproic Acid (Depakote)

Concern: Decreased Awareness and Control

Some medicines can make a person less alert and weaken muscle control, which can affect the muscle coordination needed to swallow safely. This happens because the medicine slows down how the brain and spinal cord respond.

The medications discussed below are important for a person's health, and while they may cause problems with swallowing in some individuals, they should never be stopped without speaking to the health care provider first.

Medication Type	Example of the Medication Generic (Brand Name)
Antiepileptics (treat epilepsy/seizures)	Carbamazepine (Tegretol) Gabapentin (Neurontin) Phenobarbital Phenytoin (Dilantin) Valproic Acid (Depakote)
Benzodiazepines (anti-anxiety drugs) are Medicines that help people feel calmer and less worried.	Alprazolam (Xanax) Clonazepam (Klonopin) Diazepam (Valium) Lorazepam (Ativan)
Narcotics (treat pain)	Codeine & Acetaminophen (Tylenol #3) Fentanyl (Actiq, Duragesic, Lazanda) Hydrocodone & Acetaminophen (Norco, Vicodin), Oxycodone & Acetaminophen (Endocet, Percocet), Propoxyphene & Acetaminophen (Darvocet)
Muscle Relaxants (relieve muscle spasms, relax muscles)	Baclofen (Lioresal) Cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril) Tizanidine (Zanaflex)

Concern: Contraindicated with Dysphagia

Medication	Reason
Psyllium Husk (Metamucil, Citrucel) Psyllium husk is a natural fiber that helps keep your stomach and bowels working well.	Could result in choking and/or a blockage in the esophagus.
Mineral Oil Mineral oil is a liquid medicine that may help bowel movements become easier when someone is constipated	Increased risk of Lipoid Pneumonia; Mineral oil may not elicit a normal productive cough. (Bandla HP, et al., 1999)

References:

Bandla HP, Davis SH, Hopkins NE. Lipoid pneumonia: a silent complication of mineral oil aspiration. *Pediatrics*. 1999 Feb;103(2):E19. doi: 10.1542/peds.103.2.e19. PMID: 9925865.

Cichero JA. Thickening agents used for dysphagia management: effect on bioavailability of water, medication and feelings of satiety. *Nutr J*. 2013 May 1;12:54. doi: 10.1186/1475-2891-12-54. PMID: 23634758; PMCID: PMC3660277.