

Helping your child to swallow tablets

This leaflet offers practical advice to help your child swallow tablets or capsules. Note that the advice about tablets applies to capsules too.



Being able to swallow tablets or capsules is an important life skill. Even quite young children can learn to swallow tablets.

Children may prefer to swallow tablets rather than having unpleasant-tasting liquid medicines or crushed tablets mixed with food.

This leaflet gives some general advice about helping your child to swallow tablets, and some of the different approaches you can try.

Note that you may need to get help from your nurse or doctor as some groups of children have particular difficulty swallowing tablets. These groups could include:

- Children with developmental delays or oral-motor problems
- Children with behavioural problems (which could include refusing to take any medicine)
- Children who have had a bad experience in the past, or if the tablet causes unpleasant side effects.

Top tips before you start

- There is no “right” age at which children should be able to swallow tablets – it varies widely. You are the best person to decide when to try.
- You can offer your child the choice to swallow tablets instead of taking a liquid medicine, especially if the medicine tastes unpleasant, or having to crush tablets and mix with food (which can also taste unpleasant).
- It is important that when helping or showing your child how to swallow tablets, you are relaxed and do not give the impression that this is a big issue. Your child should not feel pressured.
- Explain to your child *why* it is important to be able to swallow the tablet – because it will help them to feel better. This will help them to feel good about learning this new skill. If appropriate, say that it’s a grown-up thing to do – “like Mummy and Daddy”. You can also remind them about other skills they have learnt, such as riding a bike or tying their shoe laces, so that they feel empowered.
- If possible, show your child what to do. If you personally have difficulty swallowing tablets, ask someone who can do it to help your child. If you are anxious, your child is likely to pick up on this.
- Your child may not manage to swallow a tablet the first time they try. Tell your child that it’s OK and try again. Stay calm and avoid saying anything negative.
- If your child refuses to try again, leave it for later. It is important that your child doesn’t feel pressured.

- Praise your child if they do swallow the tablet.
- Avoid negative experiences with tablets, such as hiding tablets in food.
- Only practise swallowing tablets when your child actually needs medicine. A good time to start teaching your child is when they need ibuprofen or paracetamol, if they are willing. You can buy capsules or caplets that are small and smooth and that won’t dissolve in the mouth. (Avoid the large round tablets, which may dissolve and produce an unpleasant taste.) If your child doesn’t manage to swallow a tablet or capsule, you can give them liquid medicine and try again another time.
- Some websites suggest practising using sweets of increasing size. This may be appropriate for your child, provided that they clearly understand the difference between tablets and sweets and why they are doing it.

The basics

- Your child should swallow tablets with water or fruit squash. Avoid hot drinks as these may make tablets dissolve in the mouth. Some tablets should not be taken with milk.
- Get your child to take a few sips of drink first. This moistens the mouth (a dry mouth makes swallowing harder) and helps them to practise swallowing.
- Place the tablet in the centre of your child’s tongue, and lengthways along the tongue if the tablet is oval (or get them to do this themselves). Your child should then immediately take a big sip of drink and wash the tablet directly into their throat.
- After swallowing the tablet, they should drink some more to help the tablet go down and so that it dissolves in the stomach.
- Note that leaning the head backwards makes it *harder* to swallow, not easier.

Other approaches that may help

- Ask your child to hold some water in their mouth, then pop the tablet in – suspending the tablet in water in this way may help to flush it down.
- Your child can try holding their head in different positions – holding it tilted slightly to one side has been shown to help as this makes the food pipe (oesophagus) wider.
- Your child can try using a straw to drink the water, as the suction may help. Placing the tablet under the tongue, rather than on it, may help when using a straw.

The bottle method

- Fill a plastic bottle with water.
- Put the tablet on your child's tongue (or they can do this). They should then close their lips tightly around the bottle opening and take a drink, keeping a seal between the bottle and lips and using a sucking motion to swallow the water and tablet but without letting air into the bottle.
- Using a sports bottle may be particularly helpful, as "squirting" helps to wash the tablet down.

The "big gulp"

- Put the tablet in your child's mouth (or they can do this).
- They should then take as much water as they can hold it in their mouth, then swirl it round for about 10 seconds.
- They then take a big gulp or gulps until all the water has gone – the tablet should have gone with it!

Lean-forward method

- Put a tablet on the tongue.
- Take a sip of water but don't swallow.
- Tilt the chin toward the chest.
- Swallow the capsule and water while the head is bent forwards.

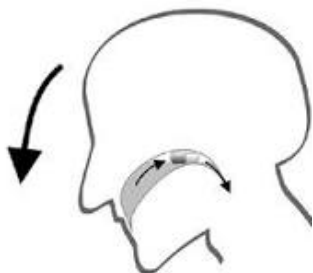


Image credit: The Annals of Family Medicine

Swallowing tablets with food

- Note that some tablets must be taken on an empty stomach, so these suggestions may not apply.
- If your child struggles to swallow tablets with liquid, or is reluctant to try, you can try giving the tablet with food.
- However, it is important not to "hide" the tablet – agree first with your child to try this approach.
- Give your child some food to chew and then place the tablet in their mouth; they can then swallow the food and tablet together.
- They may be able to take tablets with a spoonful of food with a naturally thick consistency, such as yogurt, mashed potato or apple sauce.
- You could try inserting the tablet into a small piece of bread or a marshmallow. Your child should swallow the food without chewing.

Who to contact for more information

Your child's doctor, pharmacist or nurse will be able to give you more advice if you are having difficulty. You can also get more information from:

England: NHS 111

Tel 111

www.nhs.uk

Scotland: NHS 24

Tel 111

www.nhs24.com

Wales: NHS Direct

Tel 0845 46 47 (2p per minute) or 111 (free)

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

Northern Ireland: NI Direct

www.nidirect.gov.uk

www.medicinesforchildren.org.uk