



**University Hospitals Birmingham**  
NHS Foundation Trust



# Maxillofacial diet advice for patients following surgery for head and neck cancer

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## What are the effects of surgery?

Surgical treatment of head and neck cancer can change the way you eat and drink. This can be due to pain and the changes that take place in your mouth such as the removal of teeth, the type of reconstruction you have had, and swelling after surgery. Sometimes surgery can affect the nerves and muscles that control the way you swallow making it more difficult to manage food in your mouth. It will take time for you to adjust to the changes in your mouth. The speech and language therapist will support you with these issues.

This booklet will provide you with advice and guidance as to what to eat and drink at home and to help build you up and prevent weight loss after surgery.

## What swallowing problems may I experience?

The following swallowing problems could be experienced after surgery:

- Difficulty chewing
- Difficulty swallowing
- Reduced mouth opening
- Drooling and dribbling when eating
- The feeling of too much saliva in the mouth
- Difficulty clearing food from the mouth
- Difficulty feeling food within the mouth
- Coughing when swallowing

If you have a 'flap' (piece of skin/ muscle that has been placed into your mouth) you will not damage or harm it by eating.

## What will happen after surgery?

It takes time for your mouth to recover and heal after head and neck surgery. During this time (usually around 5–10 days after surgery) you may not be able to have any food or drink by mouth; hence you may have a nasogastric tube (NG tube) to feed you.

The speech and language therapist and nursing staff on the ward will advise and support you to keep your mouth clean and the dietitian will continue to

advise on your diet/nutritional requirements via the nasogastric tube.

The speech and language therapist will support you, and provide information on how to swallow food and drinks most effectively and safely after surgery. The dietitian advises on how to reintroduce food back into your diet.

After surgery, patients normally start with a liquid diet as this is easiest to swallow, before gradually progressing onto pureed and soft, moist foods. Generally the more you eat the quicker the function in your mouth will improve as food acts as physiotherapy for your tongue, jaw and mouth.

## What will happen when I go home?

It is likely that you will be given nutritional supplements to help meet your nutritional requirements while you get used to eating and drinking again.

As you begin eating and drinking and get used to swallowing, you may not need as many supplement drinks. However, sometimes the changes in your mouth take some time to improve, so people usually go home with supplement drinks to support their recovery.

You may see a speech and language therapist and dietitian as an outpatient if you require support once you have returned home.

## Types of nourishing drinks

To start with, you may find it easier to get a lot of your energy and protein from fluids. You may want to try these in addition to, or instead of your supplement drinks, but please discuss this with your dietitian first. You can carry on drinking these alongside a pureed or soft diet.

- To fortify milk, add 4 tablespoons of milk powder to 1 pint of full fat milk and use this to make nourishing drinks such as milky coffee, malted drinks, hot chocolate and milkshakes. You can also add cream to these drinks
- Add a couple of scoops of ice cream or a thick and creamy yoghurt to milkshakes and smoothies
- Add full fat milk or cream to tinned/homemade soups for extra flavour
- Avoid 'no added sugar' or 'diet' drinks unless you are diabetic
- Supermarkets provide a wide range of milkshakes, smoothies and yoghurt

drinks on the shelf which you may like to try

- ‘Complan’ (available as soups and milkshakes) ‘Nourishment’ and ‘Nutriment’ are also appropriate to use at this time. These contain protein as well as vitamins and minerals which are needed for a balanced diet
- You should aim to consume 4 nourishing drinks per day
- Use full fat milk for extra calories and protein where you can.

## Advice and guidance for following a pureed diet

To puree food, use a blender/hand blender or food processor and add some liquid such as full fat milk, gravy or sauces.

You can puree the food to the consistency that you would like and gradually increase the texture as your healing progresses. Remember that pureeing food will increase the volume of food, so it is important to add as much energy and protein as possible.

You may find that eating takes a long time so have 6–7 small meals per day. You may decide to reheat some of the food that you have made in the microwave.

Some foods that are naturally a pureed texture include yoghurts, custards and mousses, which can be used as snacks during the day.

The following meal items are suggested for those following a pureed diet:

### Breakfast

- Instant oats with full cream milk and sugar, honey or golden syrup
- Porridge or instant oats made with full cream milk with added golden syrup, sugar or jam. You can add cream if you wish
- Smooth full cream yoghurt or fromage frais with fruit puree.

### Main meals (lunch and dinner)

- Pureed chicken/meat with gravy
- Fish (pureed) and potato pie
- Pasta with tomato or cheese sauce pureed

- Pureed Shepherds or Cottage pie
- Pureed hot pot
- Pureed casserole
- Pureed cauliflower with cheese sauce.

## Desserts

- Pureed or stewed fruit with ice cream, evaporated milk or custard
- Pureed sponge with custard or cream
- Thick and creamy yoghurts, custard, mousse, fruit fools, instant whips
- Ice cream/sorbet with flavoured sauces e.g. strawberry, chocolate, toffee.

## Advice and guidance for following a soft diet

Ideally with a soft diet you should be able to mash/break food up with a fork.

When moving to a fork-mashable or softer diet post-surgery you may want to add extra sauces to meals to make it easier for food to move around your mouth.

## Breakfast

Meal suggestions for a pureed diet can be consumed, but you can also progress to meals such as:

- Scrambled egg with grated cheese
- Wheat biscuits with full cream milk and sugar, honey or golden syrup
- Porridge or instant oats made with full cream milk with added golden syrup, sugar or jam. You can also add cream if you wish.

## Main meals (lunch and dinner)

- Casserole or stewed meats with vegetables
- Cottage or Shepherd's pie
- Omelette with cheese and soft vegetables
- Inside of a jacket potato with baked beans and cheese or tuna mayonnaise
- Corned beef hash
- Macaroni or cauliflower cheese
- Bolognaise
- Pasta bakes
- Flaked fish in sauce with mashed potato
- Soups

Examples of different sauces to have with food include gravy, white sauce, cheese sauce, parsley sauce, butter sauce, curry sauce and stock.

## Desserts

Desserts suggestions for a pureed diet can be consumed, but you can also include the following meals in your diet:

- Rice pudding
- Sponge or plain cake with custard, cream or ice cream
- Trifle or other ready make desserts from supermarkets e.g cheesecakes, mousses or sundaes
- Jelly – this can be made with evaporated milk
- Crème caramel

We recognise that your treatment is likely to have an impact on you and your family. Please inform the team if there is any support or information that you require to help you manage during this time.

**Your dietitian is:** .....





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