

# Encouraging children to swallow tablets or capsules



*Many health professionals will encounter children who are reluctant or unable to swallow tablets and capsules. This can present a challenge when children require a particular medicine where limited formulation options are available. Simple techniques can be discussed with parents to help teach their child this skill.*

## Most school-aged children are able to learn to swallow tablets and capsules

In general, children are able to learn to swallow tablets or capsules from approximately age six years, and most master the technique on their own by age ten years. Some children, particularly those with chronic conditions requiring daily medicines, can be taught to swallow pills at a younger age.

Parents frequently report barriers for children learning to swallow tablets and capsules, however, these can often easily be overcome. For example:

**Anxiety** – Children who fear swallowing pills are likely to be tense when attempting to do so, therefore making the process more difficult. This tension, particularly in the throat, neck and chest can make the child feel like they are having trouble breathing which may, in itself, cause further anxiety. Learning strategies to swallow tablets and capsules effectively, and practicing these techniques,

can help to reduce the child's anxiety and make them feel more relaxed, therefore increasing their chance of success. Children who are anxious about swallowing medicines often have parents who are also reluctant or unable to swallow medicines themselves. Therefore it is important that parents lead by example and demonstrate that swallowing pills or capsules is easy.

**Strong gag reflex** – Children who are fussy eaters or who gag frequently on food and drink can often struggle with swallowing medicines. Getting the child to take a deep breath before inserting a tablet or capsule in their mouth can help them to suppress their gag reflex.

**Texture, size and shape** – The size and shape of the tablet or capsule, and the nature of the coating can affect the ease of swallowing. Using yoghurt or a thick drink, such as a milkshake, may help to reduce a child's awareness of a tablet or capsule being swallowed.

## Techniques for swallowing tablets and capsules

There are many techniques for swallowing tablets and capsules, and it is appropriate for children to find one which works for them. In some circumstances, such as when a child needs to take ongoing medicines, it may be appropriate to train them to swallow tablets and capsules, e.g. using lollies (see: "Practice makes perfect", over page). A study of 33 children aged 2 to 17 years with pill-swallowing difficulties found that after 14 days practice, all children were able to swallow tablets or capsules.<sup>1</sup>

In general, it is best not to throw a tablet or capsule towards the back of the mouth. This is because it can actually make swallowing more difficult.

A recommended technique for swallowing a pill or capsule is to:

1. Ask the child to have a drink of water or their favourite drink to moisten their mouth
2. Place the tablet or capsule into the centre of the child's mouth
3. Ask the child to take a big sip of their drink, and then swallow

Yoghurts and thick drinks, such as milkshakes, can help ease tablets or capsules down. Using a straw to drink, with a tablet or capsule already in the mouth, may also help by getting the child to concentrate on the suction of the straw rather than thinking about the tablet or capsule going down.

Another technique is to put the capsule into a small spoonful of apple sauce or ice cream. This can help capsules to slip down the throat more easily.

The physical properties of capsules may cause them to float in the mouth when taken with water. Leaning forward when swallowing can help the capsule go down.<sup>2</sup> This technique may not be comfortable for everyone, but some children may wish to try this:

1. Ask the child look down at the floor instead of up at the ceiling
2. Slip the capsule into the centre of the child's mouth.
3. Ask the child to take a big sip of their drink while still looking at the floor. The capsule should float to the back of the child's mouth and roll down their throat with the drink.

## Other options for administering medicine

When children cannot yet swallow whole tablets or capsules, an option could be to crush a tablet or empty the contents of a capsule into food or drink. Some tablets or capsules can be compounded into a suspension, but there can be concerns about stability, bioavailability and dose accuracy.

This is not possible for all medicines, for example long-acting medicines and those with special coatings cannot be crushed or opened, and some medicines cannot be mixed with certain foods. These options must be checked with a Pharmacist first.

### References

1. Kaplan BJ, Steiger RA, Pope J, et al. Successful treatment of pill-swallowing difficulties with head posture practice. *Paediatr Child Health* 2010;15:e1-5.
2. Medsafe. Helping medicine capsules go down. *Prescriber Update* 2003;24. Available from: [www.medsafe.govt.nz](http://www.medsafe.govt.nz) (Accessed Aug, 2014)

