

# Nil by Mouth

As you are experiencing swallowing difficulties, your Speech and Language Therapist has advised you to be “Nil by Mouth”.

## **What does it mean to be Nil by Mouth?**

This means that you are not allowed to have any form of food, drink or medications by mouth. You should not suck sweets, ice cubes or ice lollies.

## **Why do I need to be Nil by Mouth?**

Swallowing is a very complicated process, involving a series of muscles working together quickly to ensure food, drink and medications are safely transported from your mouth to your stomach. Your swallowing mechanism is not working efficiently meaning that saliva, food, drink and medications may go down the wrong way entering the airway and lungs. This is known as “aspiration”.

You may have noticed you cough and splutter after eating/drinking or on your own saliva. These are some of the signs of aspiration. Some people don't show obvious signs of aspiration and this is referred to as “silent aspiration”. If food/fluids continue to enter the airway and lungs this can lead to chest infections or aspiration pneumonia. This can be a serious life-threatening condition. It may also lead to weight loss, dehydration and malnutrition.

## **What will happen next?**

You may need to have a short term feeding tube or be given fluids via a drip. If you have a short term feeding tube, this is known as a Nasogastric (NG) tube. This is a very thin tube passed via the nose into the stomach. A dietitian will assess your nutritional requirements and make recommendations regarding how much liquid feed and water you need. You can also receive your medications via this tube.

Your Speech and Language Therapist may continue to assess your swallow whilst you are in hospital. If your swallow improves during your stay, you may start eating and drinking again. Your Speech and Language Therapist and your medical team will let you know when it is safe to eat and drink again and will advise you on the safest food and fluid consistencies to eat and drink. In some cases your ability to swallow safely may not improve.

You may be required to have further instrumental assessments of your swallow e.g. an x-ray of your swallow called a Videofluoroscopy or a Fiberoptic Endoscopic Evaluation of Swallowing (FEES), which assesses your swallow using an endoscope to look into your throat. Your Speech and Language Therapist will discuss this with you if it is appropriate.

If your swallow continues to be unsafe further discussions will take place between you, the medical team, dietitian and your Speech and Language Therapist to discuss suitable long term options for feeding. This may include options regarding food and drink and/or feeding via a more permanent tube.

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## Top tips for patients who are Nil by Mouth

- **Oral hygiene** – It is very important to keep your mouth clean when you are Nil by Mouth. This is to ensure that bacteria does not build up in your mouth which can lead to infections.
- You are required to clean your mouth **every 2 hours**.  
You may be able to do this independently or may need to receive assistance from nursing staff.
  - Ensure you are sitting upright and leaning forward to avoid toothpaste falling back into the throat whilst doing mouthcare.
  - Add a small amount (pea sized) fluoride toothpaste to a small soft toothbrush.
  - Clean your teeth and tongue using a toothbrush.
  - Continue until your mouth is clean.
  - Ensure you clear/rinse your mouth after. Please do not swallow any of the water.
  - If you are unable to rinse, or have damaged gums, use lightly moistened pink sponges around the gums and tongue. Dip the pink sponges in mouthwash. Do not leave the sponges to soak in the mouthwash as the sponge head may fall off the stick.
- Apply aqua gel to lips to keep moist.
- **Managing your saliva** - Attempt to swallow your saliva as often as you can. You may require assistance in the form of suctioning from nursing staff if you are unable to safely swallow your own saliva. Your doctors may prescribe you some medication to reduce the amount of saliva you have. Avoid sleeping flat on your back if you have excess saliva. It is recommended to prop yourself up with pillows and lay on your side instead.
- **If you are suffering from dry mouth** – your doctor may prescribe you a saliva replacement gel/spray.

## Contact Details

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your swallowing, you can call the Speech and Language Therapy Department at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital 01603 287117