

TEACHING CHILDREN TO SWALLOW PILLS



Why is swallowing pills important?

If your child has a neurological condition that requires them to take medicine, swallowing pills is an important skill to learn. Some medicines only come in pill forms. Swallowing pills also helps children avoid the bitter taste of many medicines. Tablets, capsules, and pills are also easier to travel with, don't require refrigeration, and are less prone to spills, wastes, and medication errors. Once children learn to swallow pills, they usually prefer it!

How do I know if my child is ready?

If your child can follow simple instructions, and swallow "chunky" food without choking, gagging, excessive drooling, or coughing, they are probably able to swallow pills. If there is any question that your child has problems swallowing (dysphagia) you should talk to your doctor about having a swallow test. There is no exact age, but usually children 5 years and older can learn this skill.

Here are suggestions on teaching children to swallow pills:

1. The Cake Decoration Method

The simplest way to teach children to swallow pills is to start small. At the grocery store, buy several candy cake decorations in different sizes, ranging from tiny balls or sprinkles, to snowflakes and large silver balls. Also buy some tic-tacs or mini M&Ms. Now you have fake candy "pills" of 4 or 5 different sizes.

Have your child start with the smallest size candy, and place it on the middle of his tongue. Have the child keep his or her head level or tilted back. Take a big sip of water from the cup. If it doesn't go down with the first sip, encourage them to keep swallowing water...it will usually go down! Once it is swallowed, have your child repeat several times to reinforce the skill, before going up to the next size. If the child is unsuccessful with the next size, always go back to the previous size so they end the practice session on a successful note!

Repeat this process until your child has reached the tic-tac candies. If a child can swallow these candies, they should be able to swallow most pills. It might take five or six sessions until your child reaches this point. After tic-tacs, try moving on to children's multivitamins.

Although this is a handy method, it is important that your child knows the difference between medicine and candy. Also, it is important that they know not to chew the candy "pills", or real pills.

2. Swallowing with Food

Some children find it easy to swallow when the pill is combined with a bite of food. The most common foods are Jello, applesauce, peanut butter, pudding, and yogurt. This usually helps the pill slide down. Pills can also be tucked inside mandarin orange slices and swallowed whole. Other children have success with chewing a cracker, cookie, or bite of bread, and then popping the pill in their mouth and swallowing it along with the bite of food.

3. The Straw Method

Have the child place the pill on the back of their tongue, and then gulp juice or water with a straw. The pill should slide right down!

Do's and Don'ts

- DO** educate your child about the difference between medicine and candy.
- DO** teach pill swallowing BEFORE it is medically necessary.
- DO** be patient, go slow, and eliminate distractions during training.
- DO** use positive reinforcement and encouragement.
- DO** use short training sessions of only 10-15 minutes.
- DON'T** push your child until they are frustrated or upset.
- DON'T** try to trick your child or hide medicine from them.
- DON'T** use negative comments, threaten, or shame the child.

If your child is unable or refuses to swallow pills, don't force the issue. This can cause a permanent aversion to swallowing medicine. Try again in 3-6 months.

References and Resources

- www.pillswallowing.com: a great resource with several tips, videos, and images.
- www.aboutourkids.org/articles/pill_swallowing_made_easy: details on the candy technique
- thebalancedmind.org/learn/library/pill-swallowing-tips: a review of a few different pill-swallowing techniques and links to several other helpful sites and articles

