

Teaching Your Child to Swallow Pills

A Step-by-Step Guide

Written and prepared by the
Family Medical Coping Initiative (FMCI)
A Collaboration between
Child Life, Psychology and Social Work



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BEFORE YOU START

Think about whether your child has had trouble learning to swallow pills in the past.

- If the answer is **yes**, begin at Section A and then continue to Section B.
- If the answer is **no**, you can skip to Section B.

Section A

Explore with your child why they might be having trouble with swallowing pills. Knowing the reason(s) will help you make a plan to address their individual concern(s).

- Are they worried about what is inside of the pill or what the medication will do to them?
- Have they had a bad experience when trying to swallow a pill, such as gagging, vomiting, or feeling like a pill was stuck in their throat?
- Do they have a poor understanding of how the medicine will help?
- Do they have any physical or sensory problems that might make it difficult to learn to swallow pills?
- Are they worried about others finding out that they take medicine?

Help your child change their thoughts about taking the medicine.

- Explain how scientists and doctors make medicine. They test it over and over to make sure the medicine is safe and helps their specific medical concern.
- Share what the pill is supposed to do, including the ways it is supposed to help your child, such as how it might make their life easier or better.
- Discuss how it can be better to take some medicine in pill form rather than in chewable or liquid forms. Sometimes, the medical provider recommends a pill instead of liquid or chewable medicine because the pill works differently or is better for addressing the medical issue. Sometimes, a pill is better because the patient does not like the taste of the chewable or liquid medicine.
- Talk about their specific concerns or fears about what the medicine will and will not do.
- Discuss why it is better to take on a challenge—such as learning to swallow pills—rather than avoid it. Avoiding something difficult can feel better in the moment, but it can make a person feel worse in the long run.
- Tell them how learning to swallow pills, starting with very small candy (or other food alternatives), will make learning easy and fun. Many, many children have successfully learned to swallow pills this way!

If you have trouble addressing any of your child's concerns, please contact your medical team for advice.

Section B

Set the stage for effective teaching and learning.

- Be a role model: When you or people in your home swallow a pill, take the medicine in front of your child so it is seen as a regular thing people do.
- Remind your child about other things they have learned to do in the past and how learning those things took time and practice (such as riding a bike, swimming, reading, building math skills, memorizing a song). Be optimistic and encouraging.
- Think in advance with your child about a quiet and comfortable place for practice sessions.

Give your child some control by giving them choices.

- Start with water, but if your child is struggling, allow them to choose a different drink.
- Let your child choose what to drink from, such as a cup, bottle, straw, or silly straw.

Stay positive through the process.

- Provide positive feedback for effort, such as giving high-fives, saying “good job,” or offering a small prize.
- Keep trying. It will most likely take a few sessions to become comfortable with pill swallowing.
- Congratulate your child for practicing.
 - “I can tell you are really trying hard.”
 - “You can do this; it just takes practice.”
 - “I am so proud of your effort!”
- Take breaks when your child requests them, when they appear frustrated, or when you need them.
- Keep the practice upbeat, even if your child does not accomplish the desired goal in the session.

Teaching How to Swallow Pills Using Candy or Other Alternatives*

Choosing candy or alternatives* to candy

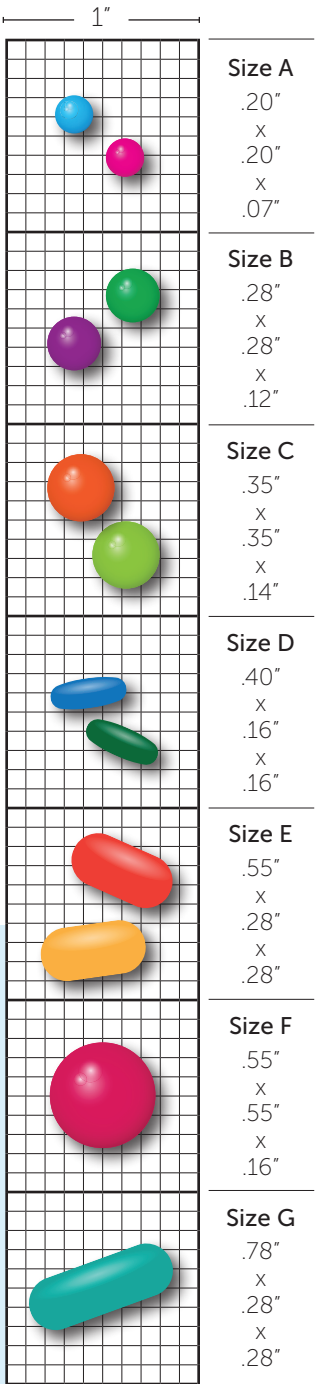
- Choose and purchase candy that is appropriate for your child, considering your child’s allergy or other needs. (For example, many chocolates contain milk products and are made in a facility that uses nuts.)
- Consider the size of the pill your child needs to take. They can gradually work up to that size. Compare the size of the pill to the candy sizes chart. Begin teaching your child with Size A and work up to the pieces of candy that are the same or a bit larger than the required medicine.
- If your child is concerned about gagging or the sensation of a pill in their throat, they may benefit from starting with a softer item, such as a mini cut-up marshmallow, which can gradually be made bigger. After they progress through increasingly larger pieces of marshmallow, they can begin with the Size A and other candies. Children without this concern may be able to start with the small, harder candy without this step.

*Alternatives to regular candy

- For children with sugar restrictions, sugar-free candies are available. You can search and find them on the internet.
- For children or families who do not eat candy, there are healthy food alternatives, such as peas, beans, rice, or small pasta such as couscous. All of these items should be cooked and soft.

Please use the Candy Size Chart for a guide on the size of foods to use. Please be aware that pieces of food that are larger than the recommended candy sizes could be a choking hazard.

Candy Size Chart





What to Do During the Pill Swallowing Session

1. Remember the choices you and your child made for the quiet and comfortable place to practice and the choice of a cup, bottle, or straw. It is ideal to have all three options available for your child to try.
2. Have your child start with taking large sips of the liquid. They can imagine being very thirsty after playing outside on a hot day. Some instructors encourage the child to try drinking continuously for a count of three (1, 2, 3); then next for a count of five (1, 2, 3, 4, 5).



Before introducing the candy, tell your child they can think about a candy or pill being washed down into their stomach

The drinking water washes the candy down your throat just like a waterfall.

3. Start with smallest candy (**Size A**). Before starting, you can allow your child to eat one if they would like.
4. Tell your child to place the candy on their tongue, then push it back a bit further with their finger. Take a large sip and swallow. Let the liquid wash the candy down the back of their throat.
5. Once your child has done this three times in a row, they can move on to the next size candy (**Size B**). If the candy doesn't go down, start back at the first step. This will ensure that the child feels successful with this size and will then be ready to move on. Continue moving to the next larger size candy until your child reaches the candy that is closest in size to the pill they are required to swallow.
6. Many children benefit from using a "Pill Swallowing Success Chart." (Please see page 10.)

Some children have trouble swallowing the candy because:

- They swish the liquid around in their mouth after taking a sip. This makes it hard to swallow the candy because it floats around in their mouth. Remind them to swallow the liquid right away. That will help the candy flow down.
- They are placing the candy on tip of the tongue and not pushing it back on the tongue before trying to swallow.
- They are rushing to get it done. Remind your child that it is important, especially in the beginning, to go one step at a time and to not rush.

Tricks to make pill-swallowing easier

- Remind your child that when they swallow the liquid, it may be a surprise that they don't feel the candy as it goes down.
- Praise your child for trying.
- Try different head positions while swallowing. (Such as turning their head to the side, looking right, or left.)
- Take breaks. Do not try to have your child learn in one practice session.
- Allow your child to eat some of the candy just for fun.

Some children are not ready for pill-swallowing, and they need to wait until they are a bit older and more mature to learn this skill. Sometimes, you may need to consult a mental health professional. Consider involving a mental health professional if your child:

- Is very anxious about new medicines or new experiences.
- Had a bad experience earlier (like gagging or vomiting) when they tried to swallow a pill and is not willing to try learning.
- Has developmental delays or oral-motor problems (such as speech problems, oral sensitivity, or has a hard time with some tastes or textures of food).
- Has behavioral problems, which could include refusing to take any medicine.



After Learning to Swallow Pills

- Make taking their medicine part of your child's regular routine, like brushing teeth or getting ready for bed.
- Keep a progress or reward chart for taking medicine. This will help remind your child to take the medicine and make it a more positive experience. Your child might earn stickers for taking the medicine and then earn a reward. The reward can be something like a small prize, an extra bedtime story, walk to the park, or any small thing your child enjoys. It can be helpful to let your child choose the reward, as it gives them a sense of control and provides extra reason to try.

**Believe in your child...
and yourself.**

You can do this!











Pill Swallowing Success Chart

I did it three times in a row!



Circle your goal size candy/food and slowly work up to swallowing that size!

I took big sips of water!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy A!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy B!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy C!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy D!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy E!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy F!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I swallowed Candy G!		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



For additional information,
The Family Medical Coping Initiative (FMCI) of
Boston Children's Hospital has presented a webinar on
Helping Your Child Take Medicine: Liquids, Chewables, and Pills.



To access this webinar and others on the FMCI YOUTUBE PLAYLIST
use your phone's camera to scan this QR code.

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**If you think you may have a medical emergency,
call your child's medical provider or 911 immediately.**



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