



Learn to Swallow Pills

A Step-by-Step Guide for Teens and Adults

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



Boston Children's Hospital

Where the world comes for answers

Many teens and adults have not yet learned to swallow pills. This is very common, and you are now on the path to learning this important skill.

BEFORE YOU START

Think about whether you have had trouble swallowing 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

Think about why you might be having trouble swallowing pills. Knowing the reason(s) will help you make a plan to address your concern(s).

- Are you worried about what is inside of the pill or what the medication will do to you?

If so, speak up. Discuss the contents of the medication or potential side effects with your medical team. Inquire about methods for addressing possible side effects or other concerns.

- Have you had a bad experience when trying to swallow a pill, such as gagging, vomiting, or feeling like a pill was stuck in your throat?

If so, learning to swallow pills using the method in this guide should help you.

- Do you understand how the medicine will help?

If not, ask your medical professional what the pill is supposed to do, including the ways it is supposed to help you, such as how it might make your life easier or better. You should always know about the medicines you take and why you are taking them.

- Do you have any physical or sensory problems that might make it difficult to learn to swallow pills?

If so, ask your medical professional. They may have some suggestions to help resolve this.

- Are you worried about others finding out that you take medicine?

If so, plan to take your medicine before you leave your home or find a private space at work to take it or take your medicine in the school nurse's office.

Try to change your thoughts about taking the medicine.

- Know that scientists and doctors develop medicine. They have tested your medicine repeatedly to make sure it is safe and helps your specific medical concern.
- Consider 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 of the taste of the chewable or liquid medicine.
- Think about 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 you feel worse in the long run.
- This guide will help you learn to swallow pills. Starting with very small candy (or other food alternatives) will make learning easier. Many, many teens and adults have successfully learned to swallow pills this way!

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

Section B

Set the stage for effective learning.

- Find a quiet and comfortable place to practice.
- Start with water (or another drink if you prefer). Try drinking from a bottle or cup with or without a straw.

Stay positive through the process.

- Think about other skills you have learned in the past and how learning those skills took time and practice (such as riding a bike, swimming, mastering a video game, using a new computer program, or driving a car).
- Keep trying. It will most likely take a few sessions to become comfortable with pill swallowing.
- Take breaks when you need them, such as when you feel frustrated or full.
- Stay upbeat, even if you don't accomplish the desired goal in the session.
- Congratulate yourself for trying.



Learn How to Swallow Pills Using Candy or Other Alternatives *

Choosing candy or alternatives* to candy

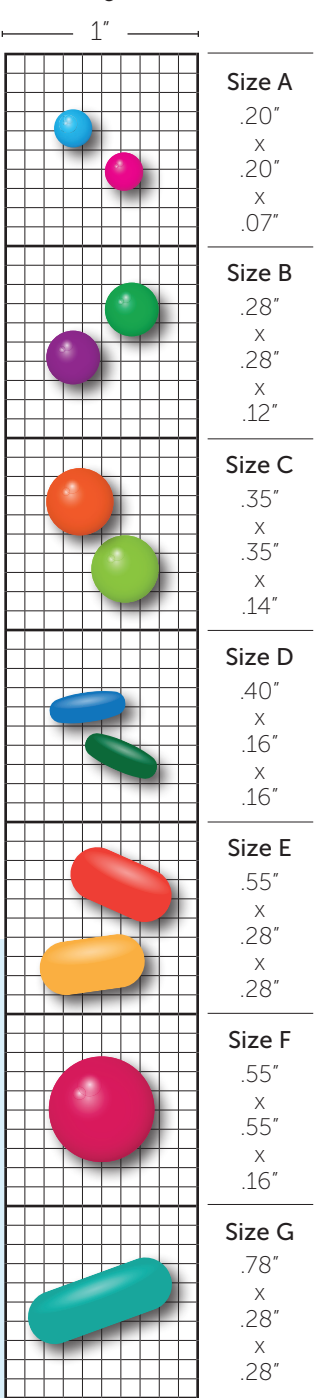
- Choose and purchase candy that is appropriate for you, considering allergies or other needs. (For example, many chocolates contain milk products and are made in a facility that uses nuts.)
- Consider the size of the pill you need to take. You can gradually work up to that size. Compare the size of the pill to the candy sizes chart. Begin with Size A and work up to the pieces of candy that are the same or a bit larger than the required medicine.
- If you are concerned about gagging or the sensation of a pill in your throat, you may benefit from starting with a softer item, such as a mini cut-up marshmallow, which can gradually be made bigger. After you progress through increasingly larger pieces of marshmallow, you can begin with the Size A and other candies. If this is not a concern, you may be able to start with the small, harder candy without this step.

*Alternatives to regular candy

- For individuals with sugar restrictions, sugar-free candies are available. You can search and find them on the internet.
- For individuals who do not eat candy, there are healthy food alternatives, such as peas, beans, rice, or small pasta such as couscous. All 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 made for a 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 you to try.
2. Start by taking large sips of the liquid. Imagine being very thirsty after being outside exercising on a hot day. Some instructors encourage drinking continuously for a count of three (1, 2, 3); then next for a count of five (1, 2, 3, 4, 5).



Before starting with the candy, think about a candy or pill gently flowing down into your stomach.

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

3. Start with smallest candy (Size A).
4. Place the candy on your tongue, then push it back a bit further with your finger. Take a large sip and swallow. Let the liquid wash the candy down the back of your throat.
5. Once you have done this three times in a row, you 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 you feel confident with this size and will be ready to move on. Continue moving to the next larger size candy until you reach the candy that is closest in size to the pill you are required to swallow.
6. Many people benefit from using a "Pill Swallowing Learning Chart" to keep track and visualize their progress.

Some people 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. Remember to swallow the liquid right away. That will help the candy flow down.
- They are placing the candy on the tip of the tongue and not pushing it back on the tongue before trying to swallow.
- They are rushing to get it done. Remember 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:

- When you swallow the liquid, it may be a surprise that you don't feel the candy as it goes down.
- Try different head positions while swallowing. (Such as turning your head to the side, looking right, or left.)
- Take breaks. Do not try to learn this in one practice session.
- Be sure to eat some of the candy just for fun. You deserve it!

If you are having a difficult time with this process, you may want to consult a mental health professional.

Consider involving a mental health professional if you:

- Feel very anxious about new medicines or new experiences.
- Had a bad experience earlier (like gagging or vomiting) when you tried to swallow a pill, and this method is not working for you because of anxiety.
- If you have oral-motor problems (such as speech problems, oral sensitivity, or a hard time with some tastes or textures of food).



After Learning to Swallow Pills

- Make taking your medicine part of your regular routine, like brushing teeth or getting ready for bed.
- Keep a progress chart for taking medicine or consider getting a 7-day pill organizer to keep track of your medicine. Choose a helpful location to keep this (for example, next to your toothbrush, or near your charger or coffee pot). This will help remind you to take the medicine and make it a more positive experience.









**Believe in yourself.
You can do this!**



Pill Swallowing Learning Chart

Swallow each candy three times in a row before moving to the next size.



Drink three large sips of water.		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy A		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy B		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy C		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy D		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy E		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy F		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swallow Candy G		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



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For additional information,
The Family Medical Coping Initiative (FMCI) of
Boston Children's Hospital has presented a webinar for caregivers,
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 are having a medical emergency,
call your medical provider or 911 immediately.**



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