SYMPTOM

# Painful swallowing

Painful swallowing is soreness or burning when food, drink, or saliva passes through your throat or food pipe.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
Sharp, sore, or burning pain when swallowing

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
Throat, neck, or behind the breastbone

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Viral throat infection, tonsillitis, acid reflux

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
Severe pain stopping you from drinking enough

**USUALLY LASTS**
Several days with infection; longer with reflux or injury

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Pain lasts a week, keeps returning, or swallowing feels difficult

## Overview

Painful swallowing means that swallowing food, drink, or saliva hurts. The medical term is odynophagia . You may feel the pain high in your throat or lower down behind your breastbone.

Painful swallowing is not the same as difficulty swallowing , called dysphagia. With dysphagia, food or liquid may feel stuck, take extra effort to swallow, or go down the wrong way. The two symptoms can happen together.

A short-lived throat infection is a common cause. Irritation from acid reflux, vomiting, dry air, smoke, or a swallowed pill can also hurt the throat or oesophagus. The oesophagus is the tube that carries food from your throat to your stomach.

The location, timing, and other symptoms can help narrow down the cause. Painful swallowing itself is a symptom, not a diagnosis.

## What it may feel or look like

The discomfort may be mild soreness or a sharp, burning pain. It may happen with every

swallow or only with solid food, hot drinks, acidic foods, or large mouthfuls.

Pain near the back of the mouth or upper neck often comes from the throat or tonsils. You might also notice redness, swollen tonsils, a hoarse voice, cough, fever, or tender glands in your neck.

Pain lower in the chest may come from the oesophagus. You may have heartburn, a sour taste, pain after taking a pill, or a feeling that food is moving slowly or sticking.

Pay attention to whether you can still drink normally. Reduced urination, a dry mouth, dizziness, or unusual tiredness can suggest dehydration.

## Common causes

Common causes include viral infections such as a cold or flu-like illness. These may cause a sore throat, cough, runny nose, hoarseness, or fever. Tonsillitis can also make swallowing painful. Some cases are caused by group A streptococcus bacteria, often called strep throat, but symptoms alone cannot always identify it.

Acid reflux can irritate the throat or oesophagus. Reflux happens when stomach contents move upward. It may cause heartburn, a sour taste, throat clearing, or symptoms that are worse after meals or when lying down.

Local irritation is another common reason. Dry air, smoking or vaping, alcohol, repeated coughing, shouting, vomiting, and very hot food or drink can inflame sensitive tissues.

Less common causes include sores in the mouth or throat, oral thrush, and inflammation caused by a pill lodging in the oesophagus. Thrush is a yeast infection that may produce creamy white patches. Oesophageal infections are more likely when the immune system is weakened.

Allergies, skin or immune conditions, and ongoing inflammation of the oesophagus can also cause pain. Rarely, a growth in the throat or oesophagus is responsible, especially when symptoms steadily worsen or occur with weight loss, persistent hoarseness, or difficulty swallowing.

Urgent causes include a piece of food stuck in the oesophagus, a deep infection around the tonsil or neck, and severe swelling near the airway. These are uncommon but need prompt assessment.

## When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if you have:

Seek same-day medical care if severe pain stops you from drinking enough. You should also get urgent advice for rapidly worsening symptoms, a muffled voice, difficulty opening your mouth, one-sided throat swelling, marked neck swelling, or signs of dehydration.

Arrange a routine appointment if the pain lasts longer than about a week, keeps returning, or has no clear improvement. Book an appointment sooner if food feels stuck, swallowing is becoming harder, you have unexplained weight loss, or you have persistent chest pain, hoarseness, or a neck lump.

People with a weakened immune system should seek medical advice early, particularly if they have fever, white patches, or pain behind the breastbone.

- Trouble breathing, noisy breathing, or sudden throat swelling
- Choking or an object blocking your airway
- An inability to swallow your saliva, especially with drooling
- Food stuck after swallowing and you cannot swallow liquids or saliva

## How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask where the pain occurs, when it began, and whether solids, liquids, or saliva trigger it. They may ask about reflux, recent infections, vomiting, medicines, smoking, weight change, and whether food sticks.

They may examine your mouth, tonsils, neck, breathing, and hydration. A throat swab or rapid test may be used when a bacterial throat infection is suspected.

If symptoms suggest a problem deeper in the oesophagus, further tests may be needed. An endoscopy uses a thin camera passed through the mouth to examine the oesophagus. A swallowing X-ray or other imaging may be considered if swallowing is difficult, something may be stuck, or there are signs of a deeper infection.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Viral throat infections usually improve without antibiotics. Antibiotics may be prescribed when testing or an examination supports a bacterial infection. Reflux, thrush, inflammation, and a lodged object each require different treatment.

While recovering, you can try:

Ask a pharmacist before using pain medicines if you take other medicines, are pregnant, or have kidney, liver, stomach, bleeding, or allergy problems.

If reflux seems to trigger the pain, avoiding late meals and remaining upright after eating may help. Do not crush or open tablets unless a pharmacist confirms that it is safe. Take pills with enough water and avoid lying down immediately afterward.

Do not force down food when it feels stuck.

- Taking small, frequent sips to maintain hydration
- Choosing soft foods and comfortable drink temperatures
- Avoiding smoke, vaping, alcohol, and foods that worsen the pain
- Eating slowly and chewing food well
- Using non-prescription pain relief according to the label

## What to expect

Pain from a straightforward viral throat infection often begins improving within several days. Irritation may settle once the trigger is removed. Reflux-related or oesophageal pain can last longer and may return until the underlying problem is treated.

Improvement means swallowing becomes less painful and drinking becomes easier. Seek reassessment if pain worsens, new difficulty swallowing develops, or symptoms return repeatedly.

Persistent painful swallowing should not simply be managed with softer food. It needs evaluation to check for ongoing inflammation, infection, injury, or narrowing of the swallowing passage.

## Common questions

Can painful swallowing happen without a sore throat?

Yes. Pain behind the breastbone may come from the oesophagus rather than the upper throat. Reflux, pill-related irritation, infection, or inflammation can cause this pattern.

Does painful swallowing mean I need antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline ?

Not usually. Many sore throats are caused by viruses, which do not respond to antibiotics. A healthcare professional may test for strep or look for another bacterial cause when appropriate.

Why does saliva hurt to swallow?

Inflamed tissue can hurt whenever the swallowing muscles move, even without food. If you cannot swallow saliva or are drooling because swallowing is impossible, seek emergency help.

What if food feels stuck as well as painful?

That may be difficulty swallowing rather than pain alone. Arrange medical assessment. If food is completely stuck and you cannot swallow liquids or saliva, seek emergency care.

Could a tablet cause the pain?

Yes. Some pills can irritate the oesophagus, particularly if taken with little water or just before lying down. Get advice if chest pain or painful swallowing starts after a tablet and does not settle.

## Sources

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