Three Secrets of a GREAT Swallow

The Swallowing Series for Therapists, Parents and Clients Char Boshart, M.A., CCC-SLP

Swallowing is one of three oral functions that we all do: swallowing, chewing, and speaking. They all use the mouth and the same mouth-parts, but their movements are very different. There are three secrets to doing a good, unharmful swallow, i.e., one that doesn't harm your teeth.

The **first secret** is that all oral functions are based on two things: Stabilization and Mobilization. To generate controlled movement, there must be an external stabilizer and an internal stabilizer. A good example of this is the act of writing. For better understanding, grab a pencil or a pen. As you hold the pencil in your hand appropriately with your fingers, the edge of your hand anchors (stabilizes) on the table. It keeps your hand in place and helps your fingers move the pencil in a refined, small manner. In order to generate refined, small movements there must be stabilization near the moving part.

Let's transfer these principles to the oral stage of swallowing. We pretty much think of the tongue as the primary mouth-part in the swallowing process, and it is. The tongue is the primary moving part, and the moving part always requires stabilization support. What do you think that would be?

If you said, biting your teeth together you are exactly correct! Biting and holding the teeth together provides a solid foundation and support for the tongue to successfully elevate to the top. Also, biting teeth together also helps to position the tongue in close proximity to the top. The jaw is a big help.

The **second secret** is intra-oral suctioning. Intra-oral suction (suction inside the mouth) is the preparatory stage of the swallow. Intra-oral suction moves the contents--liquid, food, and saliva--onto the waiting tongue. It then elevates to the top to push and roll the food back to the throat, and down. Most people who do a tongue thrust swallow then to gather their liquid, food and saliva incorrectly.

And **thirdly**, there is a distinct swallowing sequence comprised of individual parts that are completed almost simultaneously. If you are receiving (or will receive) therapy for your swallow, no doubt you'll learn all about the sequence and how to do it. Always remember to do the four parts of the swallow.

- Suction (moves the contents to the tongue; the tongue is the receiver),
- Bite (jaw closes, teeth stabilize to support the tongue),
- Squeeze Up (the front-tongue mobilizes, elevates and applies pressure on top; the contents are squeezed to the mid-tongue, then to the back-tongue), and
- Lift (the back-tongue elevates and applies mild to moderate vertical pressure to propel the contents down).

One swallow takes mere moments. It almost seems that Suction: Bite-Squeeze-Lift happens at the same time, but they don't. At first you may want to do them slowly to make sure each part is included. Increase the pace of your swallow as you become more familiar with the steps.

Eventually as your mouth learns the sequence, your swallow will happen quickly and naturally. You'll have appropriate stabilization and mobilization, intra-oral suction that works efficiently, and a swallow that looks good, feels good, and is unharmful to your teeth!