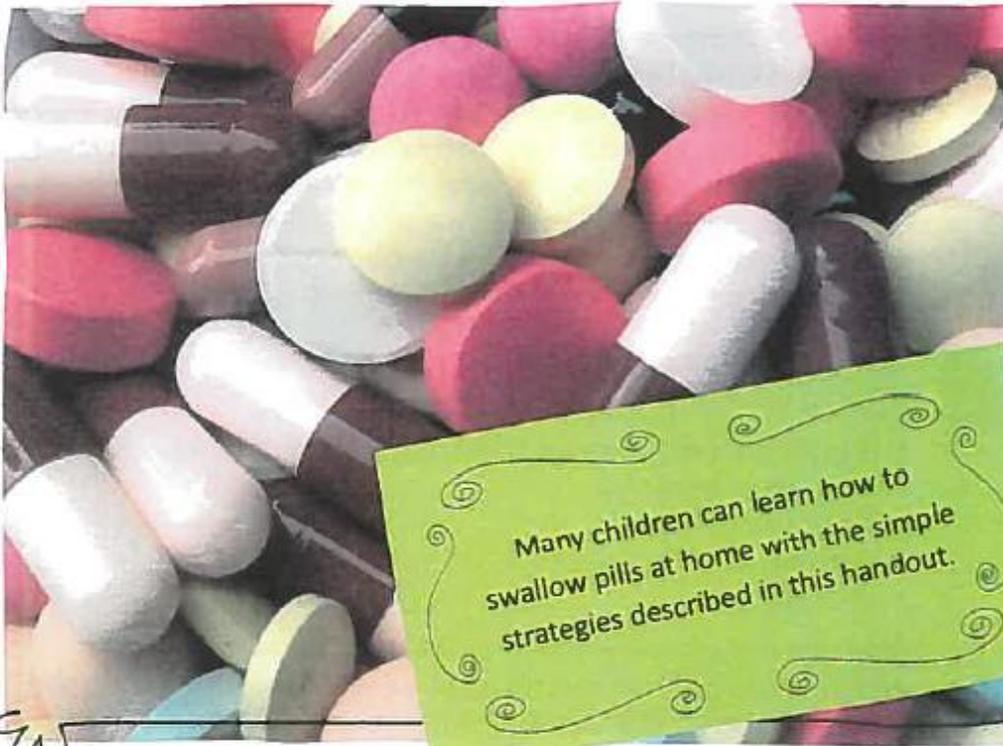


How to help your child with...

Pill Swallowing



Many children can learn how to swallow pills at home with the simple strategies described in this handout.

This handout describes a step-by-step approach to helping your child learn to swallow pills. The technique that is described is called "shaping", which involves teaching a child to do something difficult by starting with an easier task and slowly increasing the difficulty level. When teaching children to swallow pills through shaping, the child first learns to swallow a very small cake sprinkle. Once the child is able to swallow cake sprinkles with little difficulty, he/she moves on to larger cake decorations and, eventually, practice pills. This sort of shaping technique is very helpful when teaching children to swallow pills because it helps to keep them motivated and minimizes their anxiety level.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1

Explain to your child that he/she is going to learn a new skill. It is often helpful to remind your child of other skills that he/she has learned successfully, such as walking, riding a bike, or playing the piano. This is a good way to build your child's confidence in his/her ability to learn new skills. It is important for both you and your child to take a "We can do this!" approach to learning to swallow pills. Remind your child that, just like when he/she learned other skills, it will be necessary to take small steps and practice a lot in order to learn to swallow pills.

2

Starting with a very small cake sprinkle, describe and then model the following steps for your child:

- ▶ Place the candy, tablet, or capsule on the middle of your tongue
- ▶ Keep your tongue flat
- ▶ Take a sip of water
- ▶ Tilt your head back slightly
- ▶ Swallow

Make sure that you emphasize the importance of not chewing the candy and taking a large enough sip of water to ensure that the candy can be swallowed. Also, encourage your child to swallow the water right away rather than holding or swishing it around in his/her mouth. Demonstrate this process until you are sure that your child understands what he/she will be required to do. When you successfully swallow the candy, celebrate a little with your child (e.g., through an "I did it!" or a high five). This will help to build your child's motivation to learn the skill of pill swallowing.

3

Now it is your child's turn to practice swallowing a candy of the same size. If your child swallows the candy, praise his/her success (e.g., with a "You did it!", a high five, or a small prize such as a sticker). If he/she does not swallow the candy, encourage him/her to try again, saying "That's okay. Why don't you take another drink and then we'll have another try." If your child continues to experience difficulty, refer to step 6.

EW



4

After your child successfully swallows a candy, repeat steps 2 and 3 for the *same* sized candy. This will give your child practice and help to build his/her confidence. Do not move on to step 5 until your child has swallowed the same sized candy at least three times in a row.

5

Repeat steps 2 through 4 with the next largest size of candy. You can see in the photo below that there should not be a very big size increase between the practice steps. Continue to gradually increase the size of the candies or practice pills until your child is able to consistently swallow a candy that is equal to, or slightly larger than, the pill that he/she is required to take.

6

If your child becomes "stuck" at a particular candy size and is not able to swallow it after two or three attempts, praise him/her for trying and then go back to practicing with the slightly smaller candy that he/she was previously able to swallow. Then, after your child has swallowed three of the smaller candies, stop for the day. However, if your child is having a lot of difficulty, stop after just one success. The goal here is to end the session on a positive note, which will help your child to remember the pill swallowing practice as an enjoyable experience.

7

Work on pill swallowing again the next day, starting with the second largest size of practice candy that your child was able to swallow successfully. Continue the shaping procedure described above in steps 4 to 6 until your child is able to consistently swallow a practice candy or pill that is, at least, as large as the medication that he/she must take.



This is an example of a pill-swallowing hierarchy you could create using baking supplies and placebo pills. All items are pictured to scale.

Helpful Hints

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- * While your child is still learning to swallow pills, it is possible to cut or crush some medications. You should check with your pharmacist to make sure that this is okay for your child's medication.
 - * You can easily find most of the cake decorations and candies that you will require at your local grocery or bulk food store.
 - * It is often most cost-effective to buy a variety pack of cake decorations that contains an assortment of sizes.
 - * Most drug stores will be able to provide practice pills, also called "placebos", that do not contain real medication. It is important not to use empty capsules because they tend to be too light and more difficult to swallow. Usually the pharmacy will fill capsules with a safe substance like lactose. It is not essential to use placebo tablets or capsules. Candies such as "Mike 'n Ike's" can be used instead.
 - * Take advantage of broken cake decorations; they can serve as in-between sized practice candies!
 - * When practicing pill swallowing with your child, it is important to maintain a neutral or "matter-of-fact" approach if your child is struggling with a particular step. This will help to keep his/her anxiety at a manageable level. Remember to praise your child for all of his/her successes, even the small ones.

If you encounter significant difficulty or feel that learning pill swallowing at home is not the right approach for your family, you can ask your doctor for a referral to the Pediatric Health Psychology Service at the IWK Health Centre.

Pediatric Health Psychology

IWK Health Centre

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