

# How Can I Get My Child to Swallow Tablets & Capsules?

Many parents have spent many hours enticing their child to take tablets. Sometimes tablet taking becomes an issue that causes many struggles. You may feel as though your child hates you ... but often they are just as frustrated as you are.

We teach children to chew everything well; it is no wonder they think they can't swallow tablets/capsules.

A Canadian study (Kaplan, 2010) found that once children found a head position (usually central) that suited them, they were usually successful in swallowing small lollies. Those who practiced could swallow the largest lolly within 14 days, and in all cases this skill could be transferred to medications. A study by Reit-Nales (2013) found 98% of children between 1 and 4 years were able to swallow tablets successfully with practice at home daily over 14 days. A parent has even taught her son to swallow capsules at 15 months old.

You can help your child learn to swallow tablets automatically, too. Keep it fun and short.

## STEP BY STEP: TEACHING YOUR CHILD TABLET TAKING SKILLS

Adapted from 'Pill Swallowing Made Easy' (Child Study Centre, NYU Langone Medical Center, 2014).

### YOUR TOOLS:

- Patience
- A systematic approach using gradual steps to teach the skill by practising with lollies of different sizes
- Supplies: silver cake decorations; larger cake decorations (sprinkles and round balls); Nerds; Tic-Tacs

**1** Your child should be able to swallow water without dribbling. Have your child swallow one of the candy ball "tablets." It is better not referring to them as lollies during practice as lollies rarely trigger anxiety and the skill may not be transferred to medications; you may not need to start with the smallest size. Begin with the larger size lolly "tablet" that you know your child can swallow, and then move up more quickly without wasting time swallowing nothing. Tell the child to place the lolly "tablet" as far back on the tongue as possible, take a drink of water from a cup and swallow the "tablet." You can have as many practices as needed. Most children will manage swallowing these lollies easily. Praise your child for trying and achieving.

**2** After 5 consecutive successful attempts, move on to the next size lolly "tablet." The practice levels of lolly "tablets," starting from the smallest, are;

1. small silver cake decorations
2. multi-coloured mixed cake decorations
3. Nerds
4. Mini M&Ms / Mini Skittles
5. M&Ms/Skittles
6. Tic-Tac
7. Eclipse mint / Jelly Belly jelly beans

**3** Your child should swallow the lolly "tablet" 5 times in a row. Continue using the same size "tablet" until this is achieved. If they are only successful 4 times, continue with the same size lolly until you have 5 successes. Sessions should last 10–15 minutes; do not prolong the practice if your child becomes upset. Keep in mind the amount of water they have drunk and the degree of anxiety the procedure is causing.

**4** If you move to a bigger-sized lolly "tablet" and your child is unsuccessful, return to a smaller size and end the session on a positive note.

**5** In the next session always begin with the first size lolly "tablet" used at the first session. If your child had success on the first attempt, move immediately to the next size. Try practice sessions, ensuring you always have 5 successes before re-trying the size that your child was unable to swallow.

Some children are able to swallow all the sizes in one session; others need 2–6 practice sessions.

**6** Progress from lolly "tablets" to actual medications. Once the child progresses through the program to the Tic-Tac level, they rarely have difficulty swallowing medication.

### Resources available on line

<http://pillswallowing.com/intro.html>

<http://www.cdfa.org/assets/pdfs/PillSwallowing.pdf>

[http://www.rch.org.au/pharmacy/clinical\\_services/Teach\\_children\\_how\\_to\\_swallow\\_tablets\\_and\\_capsules/](http://www.rch.org.au/pharmacy/clinical_services/Teach_children_how_to_swallow_tablets_and_capsules/)

### References

Child Study Centre, NYU Langone Medical Center. (2014, March 28). *Pill Swallowing Made Easy*. New York, New York, USA.

Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America. (2012, December). *I Have to Swallow That? Pill Swallowing Techniques for Kids and Teens*. New York, New York, USA.

Kaplan, B. C. (2010). *Successful treatment of pill-swallowing difficulties with head posture practice*. *Paediatric Child Health*, 1-5.

Reit-Nales, D. N. (2013). *Acceptability of different oral formulations in infants and preschool children*. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 725-731.

## ANOTHER OPTION

### HEAD POSTURE METHOD

Watch "Better than a spoonful of sugar training video" <http://research4kids.ucalgary.ca/pillswallowing>

Familiarise yourself with the technique before teaching your child tablet taking skills. This method is based on head posture.

### TIPS FOR PARENTS:

A sticker chart may be useful for younger children

- Provide enough time for swallowing the tablet so the child does not feel pressured
- Ignore negative behaviours/whining/complaining
- Give lots of encouragement and praise when the child is swallowing tablets
- Cheese before bitter tablets can help coat the tongue and disguise the taste
- Mask strong flavours with ice cubes, liquorice, fruit or chocolate

(Crohns' and Colitis Foundation of America, 2012)

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