

## Tips for Pill Swallowing

M. Emily Burgess, MS, OTR/L & Stacey Reynolds, PhD, OTR/L  
Virginia Commonwealth University

### Signs of readiness to work on pill swallowing

- Child is able to follow directions
  - Your child should be able to follow multi-step directions (for example, “Put the pill on your tongue and take a drink of water.”) This ensures he has the attention and understanding required to practice one of the methods outlined below.
- Child is able to swallow foods of various textures
  - If your child has difficulty tolerating and swallowing mixed textures (for example a chicken pot pie that has both smooth and chunky textures) he may not be ready to practice pill swallowing. If your child gags when eating a variety of foods, he may not be ready to work on pill swallowing.
- Child is able to hold food in his mouth
  - If food falls out of your child’s mouth when he is eating or he drools excessively, he may lack the jaw strength and tongue control to work on pill swallowing.

### Methods of pill swallowing

- Shaping
  - This is a behavioral approach for learning how to swallow a pill. With this method the child begins learning how to swallow a small candy, eventually progressing up to swallowing candy that is the size of a typical pill.
  - The key component with this method is that the child must show success with swallowing the smallest candy before progressing to the next size.
  - Once your child is able to swallow candy the size of a Tic Tac or regular M&M, he can practice swallowing an actual pill.
  - See Appendix A for the progression of pill sizes recommended.
  - Have the child take a sip of water first then demonstrate the expected behavior for the child with the smallest pill. With each success, you may progress to the next pill size.
  - If the child is not successful with swallowing a pill, reassure him that it is ok and encourage him to keep drinking and swallowing the liquid being used to practice.
  - Limit practice sessions to 10-15 minutes a day. Always begin the next practice session with the size of candy the child was successful with during the last practice session.
  - Reference the video below for an example of implementing this approach
    - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0-c2RJC-Cs>

*Pill Swallowing*

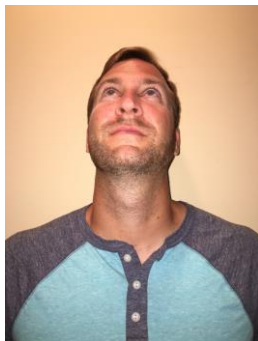
*The Barth Syndrome Foundation [www.barthsyndrome.org](http://www.barthsyndrome.org)*

*Reviewed March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

*DISCLAIMER: This fact sheet is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as medical advice. The information provided here should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care.*

- Head Posturing

- This method uses different head positions to try and find the position in which the child is most comfortable swallowing pills.
- Head positions include: straight on, tilted upward, tilted downward, turned to the right, and turned to the left.
- It should be noted that when the child swallows with his head turned to the right or the left, he will hear a “ngunk” sound.
- Ensure that the child is sitting/standing up straight with his shoulders back prior to practicing swallowing.
- Have the child practice swallowing water in each of the different head positions prior to practicing swallowing a pill.
- Once the child is comfortable, he can begin practicing swallowing a small candy (for example a Nerd or a Tic Tac) in each of the positions.
- The child can then identify what position is most comfortable or successful for him.
- Reference video below for examples of head positioning
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUzRGKx79k4>
- Reference the photos below for examples of the recommended head positions



Tilted up



Tilted down



Straight on



Turned to the right



Turned to the left

*Pill Swallowing*

The Barth Syndrome Foundation [www.barthsyndrome.org](http://www.barthsyndrome.org)

Reviewed March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017

*DISCLAIMER: This fact sheet is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as medical advice. The information provided here should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care.*

- Pop Bottle
  - With this method, the child learns to swallow the pill while drinking water so that the swallow is continuous (the pill is taken down with the drink of water.)
  - Instruct the child to take the pill and place it on his tongue then place his lips tightly around a bottle of water.
  - In a continuous motion, the child will then take a drink from the bottle with a sucking motion, ensuring that his lips remain tight around the bottle. The sucking motion will cause the bottle to move inward.
  - The pill should be swallowed with the drink of water.
  - Use the analogy of sucking on the bottle like you would a straw to assist with appropriate execution of sucking motion.
  - Reference the video below for an example of the pop bottle method:
    - [http://www.pillswallowing.com/video/fv\\_scripts/fv9.html](http://www.pillswallowing.com/video/fv_scripts/fv9.html)
  
- Special Equipment
  - Different types of equipment are commercially available to help with the pill swallowing process.
  - Pill Glide: A throat spray intended to lubricate the throat to aid in the pill swallowing process. Pill Glide comes in a variety of different flavors.
    - <http://pillglide.com/faq.asp>
  - Oralflo Cup: A cup specifically designed to aid in the pill swallowing process. A pill can be placed in the spout of the cup and swallowed in a continuous motion with the liquid in the cup.
    - <http://oralflo.com/>



### Other Tips to Consider

- Use room temperature water when swallowing pills
- Remain positive! Continuously encourage your child as he learns to swallow pills
- Visualizing successfully swallowing a pill can aid in building confidence in the pill swallowing process

*Pill Swallowing*

*The Barth Syndrome Foundation [www.barthsyndrome.org](http://www.barthsyndrome.org)*

*Reviewed March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017*

*DISCLAIMER: This fact sheet is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as medical advice. The information provided here should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care.*

- Practice pill swallowing in a quiet, calm environment to support focus and prevent stress or overstimulation
- Practice deep breathing before working on pill swallowing to decrease stress
- Practice daily to ensure the skill is learned and mastered

#### References:

- Cryzewski, D.I., Runyan, D., Lopez, M.A., & Calles, N.R. (2000). [Teaching and maintaining pill swallowing in HIV-infected children.](#) *The AIDS Reader*, 10(2), 1-8.
- Harvard Health Blog. 2014. "Two tricks to make it easier to swallow pills." Retrieved June 18, 2016 (<http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/two-tricks-make-easier-swallow-pills-201411137515>)
- Kaplan, B.J., Steiger, R.A., Pope, J., Marsh, A., Sharp, M., & Crawford, S.G. (2010). [Successful treatment of pill-swallowing difficulties with head posture practice.](#) *Pediatric Child Health*, 15(5), 1-19.
- North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System. 2016. "Pill Swallowing.com An Educational Website to Improve Pill Swallowing Skills." Retrieved June 18, 2016 (<http://www.pillswallowing.com/hintro.html>)
- Patel, A., Jacobsen, L., Jhaveri, R., & Bradford, K.K. (2015). [Effectiveness of pediatric pill swallowing interventions: a systematic review.](#) *Pediatrics*, 135(5): 1-9. Doi: 10.1542/peds.2014-2114
- Schiele, J.T., Schneider, H., Quinzler, R., Reich, G., & Haefeli, W.E. (2014). [Two techniques to make swallowing pills easier.](#) *Annals of Family Medicine*, 12(6): 550-552. doi: 10.1370/afm.1693

**Appendix A: Pill Sizes for Shaping Method of Pill Swallowing**

Candy	Length in Millimeters/Centimeters
<p>Sprinkles</p> 	<p>1-5mm</p>
<p>Nerds</p> 	<p>5mm-7mm</p>
<p>Mini M&amp;Ms</p> 	<p>8-9mm</p>
<p>Tic Tacs</p> 	<p>9mm</p>
<p>Regular M&amp;Ms/Skittles</p> 	<p>1.00-1.04cm</p>
<p>Jelly beans</p> 	<p>1.2cm</p>
<p>Mike &amp; Ikes</p> 	<p>1.5-2cm</p>

Pill Swallowing

The Barth Syndrome Foundation [www.barthsyndrome.org](http://www.barthsyndrome.org)

Reviewed March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017

DISCLAIMER: This fact sheet is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as medical advice. The information provided here should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care.