

How to Help Your Child During a Swallow Study

The Videofluoroscopic Swallow Study also called a VFSS is an x-ray study that looks at what happens in your child's mouth and throat when they swallow.

Why is it performed?

A VFSS is used when there is a concern about how well your child swallows and/or how well the airway is protected during swallowing.

Some reasons to do this study may include:

- Frequent coughing or choking with drinking and/or eating
- Gurgly respiration or wet vocal quality
- Long-lasting respiratory problems (such as pneumonia)
- Problems with swallowing

Where is the study done?

The study is usually done in the Radiology department as an outpatient. Usually the radiologist, a speech pathologist, and an occupational therapist are present.

Things to Know

- **Your child will drink a chalky white substance called barium during the study.**
 - The barium makes the food and liquid show up on the x-ray so that your doctor can watch the swallowing and movement of food from the mouth to the stomach.
 - If your child has any special food or drink needs, let the therapy team know.
- **If you are or may be pregnant you won't be able to stay in the radiology room during the study.** There will need to be another caregiver in the room with your child who can help them eat and drink.
- **Please let us know if your child has trouble with changes or participation during medical visits.** The Child Life department may be able to help them prepare for this study.
- **Siblings aren't allowed in the radiology room.** If you need to bring siblings along, a second caregiver must stay with them in the waiting area.

What should we do before we arrive?

- **Your child should come to this appointment hungry, if possible.** This will encourage them to eat and drink during the study.
- **Practice calming exercises.** Deep breathing exercises can help you stay calm and supportive. Here are some apps that offer breathing exercise options (please note they are not affiliated with Children's Colorado and may have associated costs):
 - *Smiling Mind*
 - *Sesame Street: Breathe, Think, Do*

IN CARE OF KIDS

- **For children with special eating habits:** Start practicing with food in clear zip-top bags and cut food into pieces. Bring these same foods in the clear zip-top bags for the study. This will help your child feel less stressed when we add the barium to the food.
- **For children who have trouble with waiting:** It can be helpful to have the therapy team prepare the food before you and your child enter the room. While the team is making the food, you can wait outside and enter when the food is ready.
- **For children who ONLY drink water:** You should start working to add powdered flavor or flavor drops at home that can be used during the study. Examples of what other patients have tried in the past: MIO flavor drops, Crystal Light power flavoring, Nesquik, or Breakfast Essentials chocolate powder. If you chose one of these options, please bring this with you for the study.
- **Offering foods/drinks:** Practice offering food/drinks sitting across from your child in their regular chair, booster seat, or highchair.

What should I bring from home?

- Comfort item like a favorite blanket, stuffed animal, or toy. Your child will be able to have this item with them during the study.
- Electronics: Playing a game or watching a video can be a helpful distraction.
- Preferred cups/bottles
- Flavoring for the barium
- Favorite snacks/treats to use as motivation
- Reward: Identify any item or activity that highly motivates your child. This can be offered to them once the swallow study is over.

A therapist will call you before the study to talk about any other items you may need to bring.

What can I do to comfort my child before the study?

- If your child is uncomfortable, you should offer physical comfort before the study such as holding their hand or giving them a hug. Remind them why they're at the hospital, and that nothing will hurt during their swallow study.
- Talk with your care team about how many swallows they want your child to take each time. Then explain this to your child and let them know you will count with them. You can use your fingers or the visual support from your care team.

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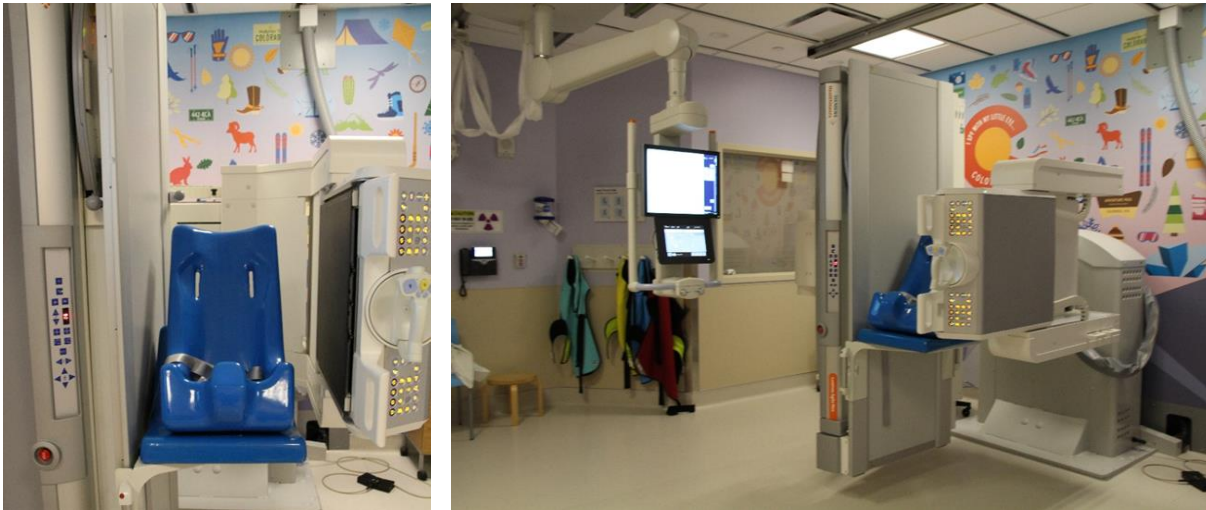
Author: Swallow Disorders Clinic | Approved by Patient Education Committee | Valid through 2026

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What can I do to support my child during the study?

- There are many staff in the room during the swallow study. If this is making your child anxious or nervous, tell us and we can step out of their line of sight.
- During the procedure, you should be the person to hand the drink or food to your child and prompt them to swallow.
- If your child is feeling anxious, help them take deep breaths by taking your own deep breaths. You can say, “Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.”
- Distraction and support will help lower your child’s anxiety.
- If your child is using an item for distraction (such as a video) and won’t drink, you can use the “**first, then**” strategy to help motivate them to drink. This means pausing the video (or other distraction) and saying, “**First** take six sips, **then** more video.”
- Allow choices when you can. This can make your child feel like they have some control over the situation by:
 - Picking a coping skill to use
 - Picking a video to watch during the procedure
 - Picking which food/drink they want to do first
 - Picking out a spoon or cup to use during the study

Procedure Room



The color and size of the chair may be different based on your child’s age, weight, and height.



If you have questions or concerns, call our main feeding and swallowing line at 720-777-6168.