

Media release

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A difficult pill to swallow

There is a trick to making a difficult pill easier to swallow.

To prevent pill oesophagitis, the inflammation and ulceration which occurs when a pill becomes stuck in the oesophagus and slowly dissolves while it is in contact with the delicate oesophagus lining, experts advise a fluid chaser of at least 100 ml of water and to stay upright for some time after taking medications.

“The biggest risk factor for pill oesophagitis is not taking medication correctly,” explains Dr Robyn Laurie, anatomical pathologist at Dorevitch Pathology.

“It’s relatively easy for the pills to become stuck without adequate water to wash them down and the benefit of gravity to help the process. The elderly are also at risk as they often have poor motility in their oesophagus and may take a lot of medications.

“The most commonly implicated drugs in the elderly are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, potassium chloride and quinidine sulphate which may also cause a stricture in the oesophagus,” says Dr Laurie. “Post-menopausal women and others with osteoporosis who take bisphosphonates, and younger patients who take doxycycline for acne, are also at a higher risk.”

When ulcerations happen the symptoms are often non-specific such as chest pain, difficulty swallowing or pain when swallowing, so a doctor may request an endoscopy and biopsy. It’s the interpretation of the biopsy tissue by a pathologist that can confirm the diagnosis.

“Pathologists are able to tell if it’s inflammation and ulceration caused by a medication as opposed to a malignancy or just reflux,” says Dr Laurie. “And the good news is that most cases of pill oesophagitis-related ulcerations heal in a matter of days once the drug is stopped without any need for medical therapy.”

The full article can be found in the [current edition](#) of ePathWay.

Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia

The RCPA is the leading organisation representing pathologists in Australasia. Its mission is to train and support pathologists and to improve the use of pathology testing to achieve better healthcare.

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