

Patient information from BMJ

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Feeding tube insertion

A feeding tube can help with several medical conditions when people are unable to eat normally. It can also be used to remove the stomach contents in situations when it's medically necessary.

What is a nasogastric tube?

The technical name for a feeding tube is a nasogastric tube. It's a thin, flexible tube that is passed through the nostril and down into your stomach.

It can then be used for one of three things:

- making sure you get the nutrition you need if you are not able to eat normally for any reason
- feeding medicine in liquid form directly into the stomach
- removing the contents of the stomach when necessary.

Why might I need a feeding tube?

There are various conditions that can affect someone's ability to eat normally, including:

- anorexia
- coma
- liver disease
- problems with the muscles in the throat and esophagus (the food pipe)
- burn injuries, and
- injuries to the mouth, head, or neck.

A nasogastric tube is also often used to:

- give nutrition after surgery on the stomach or intestine, and
- empty the stomach when someone has a bowel obstruction and food cannot pass through the bowel.

What will happen?

For this procedure you need to be sitting upright with your head tilted slightly downwards. Your doctor or nurse will help you to get into the right position.

Your doctor will then:

- pass the feeding tube into one of your nostrils, and gently feed it back into the space behind your nose and mouth (this space is called the pharynx) until you can feel it there
- ask you to take a sip of water. This helps you to swallow the tube
- ask you to keep taking sips of water until you have completely swallowed the tube
- tape the tube to your nose to keep it in place.

What are the risks?

Feeding tubes usually work well. But there can be problems. For example:

- the tube can become dislodged if someone is agitated and nervous when it is being put in place
- the tube can cause nosebleeds
- poor positioning of the tube can cause someone to breathe food into the lungs, which can cause an infection
- the tube can become blocked with food. If this can't be flushed out, then a new tube will have to be put in place.

What can I expect afterwards?

Your doctor might want to do an x-ray to check that the tube is in exactly the right place. Or he or she might extract a little fluid from your stomach through the tube to test.

If the tube is in the right place it can stay there for as long as you need it.

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