

Information leaflet
for people who require
thickened liquids

Guidelines for thickening liquids

Contents

What are thickened liquids?	03
Why do I need thickened liquids?.....	03
Where do I get the thickener?	05
Will I always need to have thickened liquids?	05
Which drinks do I need to thicken?	06
How thick do I need my liquids?	07
How do I make a thickened liquid?	08
Hints and tips	09
What can family, carers and friends do to help?	10
Can I use straws or cups with spouts?.....	10
Am I drinking enough?.....	11
How do I thicken milky drinks & nutritional supplements?.....	12
How do I swallow my tablets?.....	13
What if I notice a change in my swallowing?.....	13
Contacts for more help or information.....	14
How do I make a comment about my visit?	14

What are thickened liquids?

Thickened liquids are made by mixing a thickening powder with your usual drinks. There are different brands of thickening powder available but they all do the same thing.

Thickening powders do not add extra calories or essential nutrients to your drinks. Thickening powders may cause choking and obstruction if swallowed dry, so make sure the powder is always mixed with fluid before serving. Keep out of reach of small children or adults with cognitive or learning disabilities.

Why do I need thickened liquids?

Your speech and language therapist (a healthcare professional with specialist knowledge of swallowing problems) has assessed your swallowing and recommended that you thicken your liquids to make them safer and easier to swallow.

When you have a swallowing problem (also called **dysphagia**), drinking liquids can be more difficult than usual. This is because thin liquids move more quickly in the mouth and throat, so they are harder to control. Imagine how hard it is to hold water in your hands—it runs and spills everywhere. Now imagine how much easier it would be to hold cream, custard or yoghurt.

Because they are thicker they move more slowly so you are able to control them better. This is the same in the mouth.

If you cannot swallow thin liquids safely, drinks can go down into your windpipe and lungs. This is called **aspiration**. Aspiration may cause you to cough or choke when eating or drinking. However sometimes a person does not cough when drinks go down the wrong way. This is called **silent aspiration**.

Aspiration can seriously affect your health by causing a chest infection. This is referred to as **aspiration pneumonia**. It can be very serious, so reducing the chances of it happening is important. Increasing the thickness of your drinks is one way of helping to prevent or reduce aspiration. Your speech and language therapist will explain why you are experiencing swallowing problems and will discuss the options for managing the problem with you.

There are different causes of swallowing problems. Certain medical conditions can affect your swallowing, either by affecting the nerves and muscles that control swallowing, or due to anatomical changes. Age can also affect swallowing. As we get older, the swallowing muscles in the mouth and throat often become weaker, slower or less efficient. This can be made worse when you are ill.

Where do I get the thickener?

In hospital, the nursing staff on the ward will give the thickener to you. You will have your own tin of thickener by your bedside. If you are able to mix up your own drinks, you will be shown how to do this. If not, the nursing staff will do it for you. We can also show your family or carers how to thicken your drinks, so that they can support you.

If you are discharged home or to a care home and still require thickened liquids, you will be given a tin of thickener to take with you. Once you leave the hospital, your GP will prescribe the thickener for you alongside your other medications. You may be referred to your community speech and language therapy team if you have ongoing swallowing problems so they can continue to advise and support you as your condition changes.

Will I always need to have thickened drinks?

This depends on the cause of your swallowing problem. Many conditions, such as a mild stroke or an infection in an elderly person, cause swallowing problems for a short time but get better quickly. Other conditions do not improve quickly and so thickened liquids may be required for longer. In some cases, swallowing may get worse over time. The speech and language therapist works closely with you and your doctor to decide on the best way to manage your swallowing problems.

Which liquids do I need to thicken?

To make sure you are swallowing safely, you need to thicken all liquids to the thickness level prescribed by your speech and language therapist. This may include: **water or water-based drinks** e.g. squash/cordial **tea, coffee, hot chocolate, milk or milky drinks** e.g. Horlicks, Ovaltine, **fizzy drinks, fruit juice, fruit smoothies or yoghurt drinks, alcoholic drinks, nutritional supplements**, e.g. Ensure[®], Fortisip[®].

Liquid food such as broth, soups, gravies or sauces which are very runny or watery also need to be thickened.

If you are having milk in your cereals, either thicken the milk to the correct thickness (see page 12) or make sure the milk has been fully absorbed by the cereal before you eat it.

You may be advised to avoid eating ice cream, ice lollies, sorbet or jelly. Although they look like solid food, they melt in the mouth very quickly and turn back into liquids, so you may not be able to swallow them safely.

How thick do I need my liquids?

There are four different levels of liquid thickness. Your speech and language therapist will tell you which thickness level is right for you. Always read the instructions on the tin, as different brands can have slightly different methods and quantities. You can also download the **Thickened liquids** app on your smartphone or tablet device.



Slightly thick (level 1)

Thicker than water (e.g. single cream). Leaves a trace amount of residue on a spoon. Can be drunk through a straw.



Mildly thick (level 2)

Pours quickly from a spoon but slower than water (e.g. syrup). Can be drunk from a cup. Can be drunk through a straw with a little effort.



Moderately thick (level 3)

Pours slowly from a spoon (e.g. custard). Drops through the prongs of a fork. Can be drunk from a cup. Difficult to drink through a straw.



Extremely thick (level 4)

Holds shape on a spoon and cannot be poured (e.g. thick yoghurt). Falls off a spoon when tilted. Cannot be drunk from a cup or with a straw. Must be eaten with a spoon.

How do I make a thickened liquid?



Measure the amount of liquid & prepare in the usual way (i.e. add milk & sugar to tea, coffee, etc).



Measure the correct number of level scoops using the scoop provided.



Sprinkle the thickening powder into the drink.



Stir briskly for 30 seconds with a fork or whisk until the powder dissolves.



Leave to stand for 1–5 minutes to allow the liquid to thicken. Do not add more powder.



Test the liquid is the correct thickness before serving.

Hints and tips

Always thicken your liquids so that they look like the descriptions on page 7 rather than according to the number of scoops. The number of scoops is given as a guide because the thickness of a liquid is also influenced by other factors, such as temperature or fat content.

Liquids refers to thin soups, broths, cereals, thin sauces, gravy, oral nutritional supplements and liquid medications.

Thickened drinks stay on the tongue for longer so they may taste stronger. You may need to make drinks slightly weaker than usual.

Some liquids are already naturally thick, for example, thick milkshakes, fruit smoothies, yoghurt drinks, and some nutritional supplement drinks (for example Ensure[®], Fortisip[®]).

Stirring the powder with a spoon causes lumps. Use a fork or whisk instead.

Just as hot liquids get cold over time, thickened liquids may get thicker or thinner over time. If the liquid becomes too thick, add more liquid to make it the correct thickness. If the liquid has been standing for a long time, it may become too thick or even too thin. You may need to make the drink again.

Don't leave your spoon to stand in the liquid as saliva on the spoon will cause the thickened liquid to thin down.

Allow hot drinks to cool slightly before adding the thickener.

What can family, carers & friends do to help?

Family, carers and friends can help by showing a positive attitude toward thickened liquids. It may help them to read this booklet and to try the drinks for themselves. It is important for them to remember the reason for having thickened liquids is to make swallowing safer and easier by reducing the risk of liquids going down the wrong way (**aspiration**).

Family, carers or friends may make thickened liquids after they have read this leaflet and spoken to a healthcare professional so that they can prepare the liquid in the correct way. They should also read the instructions on the tin of thickener.

Can I use straws or cups with spouts?

You might think that drinking through a straw or a cup with a spout will be easier. However, this may send the drink further back into the mouth or throat before you have started swallowing. Using straws or spouts when drinking may increase the risk of liquid going down the wrong way into your windpipe or lungs.

As a general rule, you should not drink through straws or spouts if you have a swallowing problem unless your speech and language therapist has told you that this is safe for you.

Am I drinking enough?

It is important to make sure you are drinking enough because your body needs water and other fluids to work properly. Water makes up about two-thirds of our body weight and it is important for this to be maintained because most of the chemical reactions that happen in your body need water. You also need water for your blood to be able to carry nutrients around the body. Most people need to drink 6–8 large glasses, cups or mugs of fluid (around 2 litres) every day to keep hydrated. You may need more on a hot day or if you are more active.

How do I thicken milk, milky drinks and nutritional supplements?

Thickening liquids that contain fat is slightly different. To thicken milk, milky drinks and nutritional supplements such as Ensure[®] or Fortisip[®], follow the steps outlined below.

To make 200ml (7oz) of the drink:

1. When you're making a liquid with milk instead of water, such as milky tea or coffee, Horlicks, Ovaltine or hot chocolate, make this in a cup first without the thickener according to your taste.
2. Pour a quarter (50ml / 1.8oz) of your drink into a separate cup.
3. Add the scoops of thickener needed (see page 7) and mix into a smooth paste using a fork or small whisk.
4. Whisk in the rest of your drink up to 200 ml / 7oz until the drink is completely smooth. Another option is to use a drinks shaker to mix the liquids together.
5. Leave to stand for at least 5 minutes to allow the liquid to thicken. If the liquid looks too thick after this time, whisk in a little more liquid until you achieve the right thickness.



Small tumbler
150ml / 5.3oz
(approx.)



Standard mug
200ml / 7oz
(approx.)

How do I swallow my tablets?

In general, if you have been advised to take thickened liquids, you should not take your tablets with an unthickened (i.e. thin) drink.

Please ask your doctor, pharmacist or speech and language therapist for advice about this. Each person's needs are different and the advice will be based on your individual circumstances.

What if I notice a change in my swallowing?

You should speak to your doctor or speech and language therapist if you notice any changes in your swallowing. Do not be tempted to change the thickness level of your liquids without first discussing it with a healthcare professional. Your speech and language therapist may need to assess your swallowing again to determine the correct level of liquid thickness for you as your condition changes.

Contacts for more help or information

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any queries or concerns:

Speech and language therapy service Charing Cross Hospital

Fulham Palace Road
London W6 8RF
T 020 3311 1764

Speech and language therapy service Hammersmith Hospital

Du Cane Road
London W12 0HS
T 020 3313 3076

Speech and language therapy service St Mary's Hospital

Praed Street, London W2 1NY
T 020 3312 6189

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the **patient advice and liaison service (PALS)** on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at **pals@imperial.nhs.uk**. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in writing to:

Complaints department

Fourth floor
Salton House
St Mary's Hospital
Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please contact the communications team on **020 3312 5592**.

We have a free and premium wi-fi service at each of our five hospitals. For further information please visit our website **www.imperial.nhs.uk**

Produced by: Speech and language therapy services

Published: January 2016

Review date: January 2019

Reference no: 2609v1

Based on the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) Drinks Levels 0–4 (September 2015)

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Imperial Patient Safety Translational Research Centre is a partnership between the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and Imperial College London.

© Imperial College Healthcare
NHS Trust



HELIX CENTRE

**Designed by HELIX with
the patients and staff of Imperial
College Healthcare NHS Trust.**