

How to Use Thickeners

Often, people with swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) are unable to tolerate thin liquids (e.g. water, juice, coffee) due to the risk of choking and aspiration. Because of this, liquid thickeners can be prescribed by their doctor to decrease this risk.



The 3 common consistencies of thickened liquids are: nectar-thick, honey-thick, and pudding-thick. Your doctor will determine what consistency your liquids should be, with recommendations from a speech pathologist.

As a general rule:



Nectar-thick liquids are easily pourable and are comparable to heavy syrup found in canned fruit.

Honey-thick liquids are slightly thicker, similar to honey or a milkshake. They pour more slowly than nectar-thick. When drizzled back into the cup, honey-thick liquids may make a small pool on the surface of the drink, which quickly disappears.



Pudding-thick liquids hold their own shape. They do not pour in a stream, and are usually eaten with a spoon. However, they should not be too thick; a spoon placed in the cup should fall to the side.



Thickeners

How to make a thickened-liquid:

The instructions here are for modified food starch thickeners, such as Thick It. (Thickeners made from xanthum gum, such as Simply Thick, have different procedures).

You will need:

Drinking cup



Measuring cup (for measuring the drink)



Scoop or dry measuring spoon (check package directions)



Spoon for stirring

Follow the instructions on the label of the container.

1. Measure the drink, pour into the drinking cup, and add the correct amount of thickener.
2. Stir with a spoon. **Stop stirring as soon as the powder is absorbed.** Too much stirring causes over-thickening.
3. Wait a full minute for the liquid to thicken completely. Avoid stirring it since this will change its consistency.
4. Always test the beverage before serving by taking a spoonful and letting it flow back into the cup.

KEEP IN MIND

- ◆ Become familiar with the different thickness levels so you can tell when a drink is too thick or thin. You can also purchase pre-thickened beverages. There are a number of manufacturers of thickening agents and pre-thickened drinks.
- ◆ Often, certain foods are overlooked as needing to be thickened. These include soup, milk in cereal, sauces, etc. Do not use packaged thickeners to thicken food. Instead, instant potato flakes or baby cereal work well and are more nutritious. Bread crumbs are not recommended since they cause the food to become too thick.
- ◆ Watch out for mixed-consistency foods, such as vegetable soup, fruit cocktail, meat sauces, etc. These can be difficult for individuals to chew and swallow, and the liquid may be too thin.
- ◆ Ice cream, sherbet, water ice, ice cubes and Jell-O are considered thin liquids since they melt in the mouth to a thin consistency. Ask your doctor about whether the person is allowed these items.
- ◆ Although medically necessary, some individuals don't prefer the taste or consistency of a thickened beverage. Because of this, some may not reach their daily recommended fluid intake which could lead to dehydration. Encourage everyone to drink 6 to 8 cups of fluid every day, unless the doctor restricts the fluid intake because of a medical condition.

