

Thickening Drinks

As you are experiencing difficulties with your swallowing, your Speech and Language Therapist has advised you to have thickened drinks.

Why do I need to use thickener?

Normal drinks such as water or tea and coffee need the throat muscles to be in good working order to be swallowed safely.

Swallowing is a very complicated process, which involves a series of muscles working together quickly to ensure your airway closes. If the muscles are weak, they may not work quickly enough and drinks may go down the wrong way. You may have noticed that you cough and splutter after drinking. This is a sign that the muscles are not working as they should do and drink is going into your airway rather than your food pipe.

'Aspiration' is the term used to describe food, drink and/or saliva going into your airway. If drinks enter the airway, this can cause chest infections or pneumonia, which may be very serious.

What are thickened drinks?

A thickened drink is any drink which is made thicker than its usual consistency by adding a thickening agent. The thickening agent is in powder form which you add to your drinks. The powder is prescribed by your GP or provided for you in hospital. It does not contain any medicine or nutrition, but works by making a drink thicker, so it moves more slowly giving the muscles time to work and therefore makes it easier to control for safe swallowing.

Levels of thickened drinks

Each person is different and needs to have a different amount of thickener in their drinks in order to swallow safely. The table below shows the different consistencies, and your Speech and Language Therapist will advise you as to which one you should have.

<p>1 SLIGHTLY THICK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add 1 level scoops of thickener a dry cup • Then add 200mLs of drink to the cup • Mix well • Leave to stand for 1 minute
<p>2 MILDLY THICK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add 2 level scoops of thickener to a dry cup • Then add 200mLs of drink to the cup • Mix well • Leave to stand for 1 minute
<p>3 MODERATELY THICK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add 3 level scoops of thickener to a dry cup • Then add 200mLs of drink to the cup • Mix well • Leave to stand for 1 minute
<p>4 EXTREMELY THICK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add 6 level scoops of thickener to a dry cup • Then add 200mLs of drink to the cup. • Mix well • Leave to stand for 1 minute

* Measurements given are for 'Thick & Easy Clear'. Other thickeners are available; please check the tin for how many scoops are needed for each level and the method for making them.

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Top tips for thickening drinks

- Some thickeners need to be put in a dry cup. Measure the thickener into a cup. Make up the drink in a separate container, and then add to the thickener. When mixing the drink with the thickener, stir vigorously, or use a shaker.
- Thickener must be added to ALL thin drinks – this also includes milk on cereal (except porridge and well soaked Weetabix).
- Soups and sauces also need to be thickened to the correct consistency.
- If you are having your medication in liquid form this will also need to be thickened to the correct consistency. If you are unsure if your medication can be thickened please consult your GP or pharmacist.
- If you are thickening milky drinks, you need to whisk them first to break up the fat particles before adding to the thickener.
- Water is not very palatable when thickened, try squashes or juices instead.
- Pre-thickening and refrigerating a jug of drink ready for a whole day may be a good idea (make sure that you stir before each use).
- It is not advised to thicken any supplements such as build up soups or milkshakes. Pre-packaged thickened supplements can be prescribed. Please ask your Dietitian or Speech and Language Therapist for more information regarding this.
- Avoid foods that change consistency (i.e. melt to a thin liquid as you eat them) e.g. jelly or ice-cream.
- Be careful with foods that are preserved in liquid (e.g. tinned fruit) – avoid the thin fluid that they are contained in. Some fruits also contain excess juice such as oranges, pineapple and grapefruit and so should be avoided. As an alternative you can take liquid fruit juices that have been thickened to the correct consistency or in the form of smoothies.
- Some drinks available in the shops are naturally thicker than water. There is an objective test that can be done on drinks to find out what IDDSI level they are. Please contact your speech and language therapist to find out more.

Contact Details

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your swallowing, you can call the Speech and Language Therapy Department at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital 01603 287117. Answerphone available. We aim to get back to you within 2 working days.