

Dysphagia Diet Liquid Levels

Liquid description

Your speech-language pathologist or provider may recommend you thicken your liquids before you drink them. There are four kinds of liquids that may be recommended:

- Level 0: Regular (thin) liquids
- Level 2: Mildly thick
- Level 3: Moderately thick
- Level 4: Extremely thick

Who needs thickened liquids?

Thickened liquids may be recommended by a provider or speech-language pathologist based upon your specific needs. The purpose of thickened liquids is to make swallowing safer and easier. These types of liquids are for people who may experience the following:

- Dysphagia (difficulty swallowing)
- Weakness in the muscles of the mouth and/or throat
- People who have a high risk for choking or aspirating

Benefits of thickened liquids

There are many benefits of thickened liquids.

- Thickened liquids can reduce the risk of liquids going into your airway and lungs. Liquid in your lungs can cause aspiration pneumonia, a lung infection.
- Thickened liquids move slower in your mouth and throat. This gives you better control of the liquids before and during the swallow.

Treatment

Often the most effective and immediate treatment for difficulty swallowing is to change the consistency/thickness of liquids. In many cases, thicker liquids are easier and safer to swallow. These changes may be short-term. The speech-language pathologist will monitor your swallowing and advance your diet when appropriate.

How do I thicken liquids?

Some liquids are naturally thick. Other liquids can be made thick with special starch or gel. These products change the thickness of liquids without changing the taste. Most products can be used with hot or cold liquids. These products can be found at your local pharmacy, from medical suppliers or can be ordered online. You do not need a prescription.

Starch thickeners:

- Come in a powdered form
- Available in single-serving packets or large cans
- Take up to 5 minutes to fully thicken
- Less expensive

Gel thickeners:

- Available in single-serving packets or in bulk
- Gel-thickened liquids are ready to drink immediately
- Do not over-thicken or separate over time
- More expensive

Your speech-language pathologist or dietitian can teach you how to use both types of thickener.

Pre-thickened liquids

Pre-thickened liquids can be purchased from medical suppliers or online. These liquids come already made to the recommended consistency. They are ready to drink and do not need powder/starch or gel thickener added. These drinks are more expensive but can be more convenient for events like eating out or traveling.

What about ice cubes?

Water is a thin (Level 0) liquid. When ice cubes melt, the water they produce can make a thickened liquid too thin. You can make your own thickened ice cubes by thickening water to your recommended thickness level. Freeze the thickened water in ice cube trays. Use those ice cubes to cool your thickened drinks safely.

Complications

People with dysphagia are at risk for choking, aspiration pneumonia and other respiratory problems. These serious conditions can result in sudden medical emergencies or chronic illnesses that affect health and quality of life.

To eat and drink safely and get the nutrition you need, it is important to follow your new diet. Your health care team has given you this information as part of your care. Ask your provider, dietitian or speech-language pathologist if you have questions.

Liquid Level	Description
Level 0 Regular (thin)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are the liquids most people drink every day. • Examples include water, coffee, tea, milk, juice, pop, beer, wine, etc.
Level 2 Mildly thick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flow off a spoon • Can be sipped from a cup, pour quickly from a spoon, but move slower than thin drinks • Effort is required to drink this thickness through a straw • Similar to fruit nectars or maple syrup
Level 3 Moderately thick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be sipped from a cup or eaten with a spoon • Difficult to suck through a straw • Pour very slowly • Similar in consistency to honey
Level 4 Extremely thick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar in consistency to pudding • Cannot be sipped from a cup or with a straw • Can be eaten with a spoon