

## **It is so hard to swallow and the use of thickeners.**

Dysphagia is the medical term for swallowing difficulties and it is reported that in some care homes between 50 – 75% of the residents may have dysphagia. Those with dysphagia may have problems swallowing certain foods or liquids and some may be unable to swallow at all. The texture of the diet and /or consistency of the fluids may need to be changed and the Speech Language Therapist (SLT) and a Dietitian may have given the appropriate and tailor made advice.

### **How many may have dysphagia?**

It is estimated that dysphagia can occur in up to 30% of people aged over 65 years. The table below shows the approximate incidence of dysphagia for certain clinical conditions; however it does not include every condition.

<b>Clinical condition/patient group</b>	<b>Approximate incidence of dysphagia</b>
Motor neurone disease patients	90%
Dementia patients	68%
Stroke survivors	40%
Head and neck cancer patients	50%
Parkinson's disease patients	50%
Multiple sclerosis patients	30%

### **What are the signs of dysphagia?**

These may include:

- coughing or wet/gurgly voice or choking when eating or drinking
- 'pocketing' of food in the mouth
- a sensation that food is stuck in the throat or chest
- regurgitation of food, sometimes through the nose
- persistent drooling of saliva

Weight loss, malnutrition and repeated chest infections or aspiration pneumonia may result if the dysphagia is not managed well.

## The role of thickeners.

Thickeners are used to thicken foods and fluids to various consistencies. Thickeners can help slow the transit of foods and fluids to allow more time to coordinate the swallowing process safely. This prevents the foods and fluids from entering the lungs to cause serious complications such as chest infections and death due to choking or aspiration pneumonia. This article now looks at the role of thickeners and fluid consistencies.

## Types of thickeners.

Thickeners have evolved over the years and factors such of appearance, ease of mixing, palatability and compliance has resulted in a new range of gum based thickeners that have been developed. The first type of thickeners were starch based and starch based thickeners are appropriate to use in catering/ food production.

The Speech and Language Therapist will recommend that a thickener is prescribed.

The table below gives a brief overview of the types of thickeners and factors to consider when using the thickeners.

<b>Gum based thickeners</b>	<b>Starch based thickeners</b>
Examples: Nutilus Clear® Resource Thicken Up Clear® Thick & Easy Clear®	Examples: Nutilus® Powder Resource Thicken Up® Thick & Easy® Thicken Aid® Thixo-D® (Original) Thixo-D® (Calorie- free) Vitaquick®
Unaffected by amylase. Amylase is found in saliva.	Amylase may break down the starch
More palatable	Less palatable
Improved stability	Consistency alters over time
Small volume needed for different consistencies	Additional powder can be added to achieve the appropriate consistency
Does not affect visual appearance	

More soluble

Thick & Easy®, Nutilis® Powder, Thick & Easy Clear® and Nutilis Clear® are the most common thickeners prescribed in Sheffield.

### How much thickener is needed in fluids to obtain the correct consistency?

The amount of thickener required will vary and is dependent on how much is drunk and the consistency that is required. All adults should be encouraged to drink at least 1500 mls of fluid each day. Below is a reminder of the national descriptors of thickened fluids. There are 3 stages and the consistency is also shown as pictures!

National descriptors Thickened fluid	Fluid to which a commercial thickener has been added to thicken consistency
Stage 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• can be drunk through a straw</li><li>• can be drunk from a cup if advised or preferred</li><li>• leaves a thin coat on the back of a spoon</li></ul>
Stage 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• cannot be drunk through a straw</li><li>• can be drunk from a cup</li><li>• leaves a thick coat on the back of a spoon</li></ul>
Stage 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• cannot be drunk through a straw</li><li>• cannot be drunk from a cup</li><li>• needs to be taken with a spoon</li></ul>

#### Stage 1

#### Stage 2

#### Stage 3



The amount of thickener required to thicken fluids to one of the desired 3 stages will depend on the type of thickener used. The companies provide specific information to state how much thickener is needed for particular fluids or will provide an overview guide of how many containers of thickener are required each 28 day prescription depending on the consistency needed. It is important not to confuse the types of thickeners as the starch based and gum based thickeners are two different products and are not interchangeable. Only use the scoop provided in the container for that particular thickener, as the scoop sizes vary. The table below gives examples of minimum requirements per 28 days to thicken 1500 ml fluid to the desired consistency. Please remember if your resident drinks more than this volume then more thickener is needed.

Thickener	Type of base	Presentation	Stage 1- number of containers	Stage 2- number of containers	Stage 3 – number of containers
<b>Thick &amp;Easy®</b>	Starch	225 g	8	13	17
<b>Thick &amp; Easy Clear®</b>	Gum	126 g	4	7	11
<b>Nutilis® Powder</b>	Starch	300 g	6	9	12
<b>Nutilis Clear®</b>	Gum	175 g	3	6	9

There are a number of points to consider regarding use of thickeners within your Care Home and these are given below.

- If possible use the same thickener for all residents that have dysphagia as this can minimise administration errors and wastage.
- Avoid using different thickeners in your Care Home unless your resident specifically needs a particular/different thickener to aid compliance on use, has a clinical need or personal preference.
- Avoid using sachets of thickeners and convert to the equivalent tin presentation. For example 25 x 9 g sachets are equivalent to 1 x 225 g tin.
- Avoid using pre thickened drinks.
- Follow the detailed information and guidance given by the Speech and Language Therapist and evidence the care plan by written documentation.

- Ensure there is clear communication to indicate the residents needing thickened fluids, the volume needed throughout the day and the consistency required.
- Ensure that a risk assessment is performed on the storage of thickeners. There should be limited access which allows ready availability by appropriately trained staff (and family). Staff should be aware of where the stocks of thickeners are stored and where the opened containers are stored.
- Once the container is opened and are in use for a period of time please make sure that the lids are replaced and the scoops are kept clean and dry to prevent any moisture entering the container. It is good practice to intermittently inspect opened containers to make sure the thickener is still 'fit for use'
- Ensure that a risk assessment has been performed when there are jugs of water freely available to residents but those residents with swallowing difficulties and needing a thickener are not at risk from drinking normal water.
- Take advantage of training programmes that are delivered or organised by Speech and Language Therapists so that staff administering thickened fluids to residents remain competent.


If you need more specific information from the companies that make the thickeners, you will find practical and useful information about the 4 thickeners mentioned above.

<https://www.fresnius-kabi.co.uk> and follow links for Thick & Easy® and Thick & Easy Clear®

<https://www.nutricia.co.uk> and follow the links to Nutilis® Powder and Nutilis Clear®



And finally ----

Please look out for a  poster that will come your way very soon. What's it about? The A3 sized poster is titled 'Management of Thickening Agents for Dysphagia – Checklist for Care Home Staff'

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