

Healthcare professional guide: Thickeners & thickening ONS

Thickeners can be used to thicken fluid for people with dysphagia. Thickening a fluid can slow down its transit time through the mouth and throat which may help achieve a safer swallow for those with dysphagia. Aspiration can be a common feature of dysphagia and use of thickeners may help to reduce risk of aspiration.

Thickeners should only be prescribed on the recommendation of a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) following diagnosis of dysphagia.

Advice to thicken fluid will depend on the person's degree of dysphagia, and the consistency of fluid advised by the SLT.

Consistency of thickened fluid is described as IDDSI (International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative) Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 or Level 4 (increasing in thickness from Level 1 to Level 4).

It is important to remember that regardless of their mental capacity to make other decisions, people with diagnosed dysphagia can make the decision not to adhere to SLT guidance regarding thickening fluids, and their right to make this decision should be respected. Thickening fluids does not necessarily prevent aspiration of fluid and aspirating thickened fluid is not without risk. In addition, people taking thickened fluids tend to drink less, thereby increasing their risk of dehydration and all its comorbidities.

If a dysphagia assessment recommends thickened liquids and the person has chosen to follow this advice for all fluids, then all fluids consumed need to be thickened to the correct texture, including those taken with or as part of medication.

Which thickener to prescribe

Resource ThickenUp Clear is the first-choice thickener in Hertfordshire hospitals and community, and Nutilis Clear is the first choice thickener in West Essex hospital and community. Prescribing only these thickeners as advised ensures continuity of product use post discharge and avoids confusion. Resource ThickenUp Clear and Nutilis Clear are both more cost-effective products than Resource ThickenUp and Nutilis. They are also significantly more palatable for people.

How much thickener to prescribe

The amount of thickener required by each person will vary and is dependent on the person's choice about whether to follow SLT advice, which consistency is required and how much fluid the person drinks.

All adults should be encouraged to drink at least 1600ml fluid per day. For people who have chosen to follow the SLTs advice for all fluids the amounts of thickener advised below are the **minimum** quantities required each 28 days to thicken 1600ml fluid per day to the correct consistency.

People who drink more than 1600ml fluid per day may require prescription of a greater quantity of thickener.

| Thickener | Presentation | Minimum requirement per 28 days (IDDSI) | | | |
|--|---|---|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 4 |
| NB Resource ThickenUp & Nutilis are different products – do not prescribe | NB Avoid prescribing sachets as these are not cost effective | | | | |
| Resource ThickenUp Clear | 127g tub | 3 tubs (= 381g) | 5 tubs (= 635g) | 9 tubs (= 1,143g) | 17 tubs (= 2,159g) |
| Nutilis Clear | 175g tub | 1 tubs (= 175g) | 4 tubs (= 700g) | 5 tubs (= 875g) | 12 tubs (= 2,100g) |

A small number of people may use an alternative thickener and a direct swap to Resource ThickenUp Clear/Nutilis Clear should not be made without SLT input/re-training because the products require different quantities to be added to 200ml fluid and have significantly different instructions for use.

Thickeners and oral nutritional supplements (ONS)

Thickening ONS is known to be problematic. **If patients who require thickened fluids also meet criteria for ONS prescription** (see [Adult ONS in Primary Care - Quick guide](#)), a pre-thickened ONS is likely to be a more cost effective choice than a 'normal' ONS plus addition of a prescribed thickener. If the person has chosen to follow SLT advice about thickener, **a thickener will need to be prescribed for addition to other drinks.**

The following products may be appropriate to prescribe in this situation:

| Criteria | ONS Product (*first line choice*) - Therapeutic dose = 2 per day |
|---|--|
| ✓ Patient/carers can prepare powder ONS # ✓ Patient can manage 2 x 230ml ONS per day | Food based advice & *Slo Milkshake Level 1, Level 2 or Level 3* |
| * Patient/carers cannot prepare powder ONS + ✓ Patient can manage 2 x 230ml ONS per day | Food based advice & Fresubin Thickened Level 2 or 3 |
| ✓ Patient cannot manage 2 x 230ml ONS per day ✓ Patient requires Level 3 thickened fluids only | Food based advice & Nutlis Complete Drink/Creme Level 3 |
| ✓ Patient requires Level 4 thickened fluids only | Seek dietetic advice & Nutlis Fruit Level 4 |

NB will **always** apply if patient is resident in a care home + NB will **never** apply if patient is resident in a care home

Oral hygiene and dysphagia

Poor oral hygiene has been linked with increased presence of respiratory pathogens in oral secretions. If those oral secretions are aspirated they can significantly increase likelihood of respiratory infection or aspiration pneumonia requiring [antibiotic prescription](#) with or without acute admission.

Regardless of whether a thickener and/or thickened ONS is prescribed or not, good mouthcare is a necessity for anyone at risk of aspiration.

The following resources can help support people and their carers to provide good mouth care:

Written resources

[Mouth care for older people - Information for carers](#) (British Society of Gerodontology)

[Improving oral health for adults in care homes: A quick guide for care home managers](#) (NICE)

[Mouth care for people with dementia](#) (Dementia UK)

Links to videos

[Looking after the mouth for carers](#) (British Society for Disability and Oral Health and British Society for Gerodontology)

[How to clean a denture](#) (Health Education England)

[Supporting patients who are resistant to mouth care](#) (Health Education England)

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