



## Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes: Use of Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia

### Introduction

Dysphagia is the term used to describe difficulty with swallowing, which includes several actions required for eating and drinking safely and efficiently. These include:

- preparing food or fluids in the mouth
- moving it backwards for swallowing
- triggering a swallow
- clearing food or fluid after swallowing.

Some people may have problems swallowing certain foods or liquids whilst others cannot swallow at all.

Dysphagia can occur in the:

- mouth
- throat
- tube leading to the stomach
- a combination of these.

Symptoms include:

- coughing or choking when drinking or eating
- bringing food back up, sometimes through the nose
- a sensation that food is stuck in the throat or chest
- persistent drooling of saliva
- being unable to chew food properly
- not wanting to eat or drink
- a gurgly, wet-sounding voice when eating or drinking.

Dysphagia can lead to choking and difficulty breathing.

Over time dysphagia can cause symptoms such as weight loss, recurrent chest infections and aspiration pneumonia, and lead to malnutrition, dehydration, and a reduced quality of life.

**Thickeners are used to thicken fluids for people with dysphagia to reduce these risks.**

Food and fluid should be provided and given to people in a form they can safely consume, highlighted in [The Francis Report](#) (2013) of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry.

Treatment of dysphagia may include:

- Exercises to help improve the efficiency of the swallow
- Strategies to follow when eating and drinking to improve safety and/or comfort
- Advice about:
  - posture and positioning
  - the rate of presentation of food or liquid
  - the time between bites and swallows
  - how the environment might help at meal and drink times (e.g., less distractions)
  - how others might be able to help at meal and drink times
  - texture modification.

Other people who also provide help for people with dysphagia may include:

ASCOT • BRACKNELL • FARNHAM • MAIDENHEAD • NORTH EAST HAMPSHIRE • SLOUGH • SURREY HEATH • WINDSOR

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- Physiotherapists for advice about posture, positioning, and chest care
- Occupational Therapists for advice about eating and drinking aids, adaptations, and utensils at mealtimes
- Dietitians for advice about nutritional intake, and
- Psychologists for advice about distress at mealtimes.

Advice to thicken fluids will depend on the resident's type and severity of dysphagia.

Thickening fluids:

- slows down the movement of fluids through the mouth and throat, and
- increases the length of time available for the airways to close.

This can help to reduce the possibility of a resident swallowing unsafely minimising the risk of aspiration (fluids going down the 'wrong way').

**Residents with suspected dysphagia must be referred for a speech and language therapist (SLT) assessment for guidance on appropriate food and drink consistencies.**

If you suspect a resident has dysphagia:

- complete the SLT mealtime log,
- complete the SLT mouthcare log, and
- refer the resident to SLT if appropriate.

The [International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative \(IDDSI\)](#) framework ranges from level 0 to level 7 (see Appendix 1).

Drinks are measured from Levels 0-4.

Foods are measured from Levels 3-7.

### Policies and procedures

Care home providers should have written processes covering all aspects related to the use of thickening products within the care home medicines policy.

### Storage

Best practice is to store the resident's labelled container of thickener safely and securely, in a similar manner to medicines. Refer to [Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes: Medicines' storage](#).

Access to thickeners should be restricted to prevent untrained members of staff, the resident, or their relatives, accidentally swallowing thickening powder ([Patient Safety Alert: Patient safety alert – Risk of death from asphyxiation by accidental ingestion of fluid/food thickening powder](#)).

**Thickeners must not be shared between residents.**

### Management plan

Individualised risk assessment and care planning is required to ensure that vulnerable people are identified and protected.

An individual management plan for each resident prescribed a thickener should contain clearly documented details of:

- the consistency of fluids the resident can manage
- the texture or consistency of foods the resident can manage
- feeding strategies, such as:
  - the resident's posture when drinking and eating, e.g., head or body positioning

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- how to manage oral hygiene
- introducing ways to increase the resident's confidence and reduce fear of choking
- the environment, e.g., less distractions
- person-centred care, e.g., favourite flavours, favourite foods such as yoghurts, custards
- anticipated duration of treatment, as dysphagia can be a temporary condition for some people.

**The resident should be reviewed at the recommended time to assess whether to continue the thickener.**

It is best practice:

- to add details of the IDDSI Level fluids should be thickened to, or
- to add 'see the latest SLT assessment for consistency required'

to the directions on the prescription and the Medicines Administration Record (MAR) chart.

Each thickening agent prescribed is for that resident only and is the property of that resident.

**Thickeners must not be shared between residents.**

Effective mouth care should be given to reduce the risk of aspiration pneumonia.

### Use of thickening products

The recommendation to prescribe a thickener should come from a SLT and should be based on the resident's level and severity of dysphagia, the desired consistency or texture required, palatability and cost-effectiveness.

It is important that thickening agents are mixed appropriately to produce the required IDDSI Level for the resident.

Thickening agents:

- have a specific scoop to be used for that product,
- scoop size differs between products.

**Always use the correct scoop for the product. Scoops cannot be shared between products.**

Directions for mixing are:

- for that particular thickening agent only,
- stated on the product packaging, and
- include instructions on the amount of powder (number of 'scoops') to be added to a specified volume of fluid (often 200ml) to achieve IDDSI Levels 1, 2, 3 or 4.

The directions on the packaging will state whether to add the powder to the liquid, or liquid to the powder; this may differ between products.

### Quantities of thickener

Thickeners should be prescribed by the tin.

Ensure quantities of thickeners prescribed are regularly reviewed:

- too many can lead to stockpiling and waste,
- too little could put people at risk.

Quantities may vary due to the time of year, e.g., more drinks maybe required in the summer.

Guidance about quantities needed can be found in [Guidance for Prescribing Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia](#).

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## Education and Training

Speech and language therapists can arrange education and training for care staff responsible for providing nutrition, hydration, and mealtime support for residents with dysphagia to reduce the possibility of malnutrition, dehydration, aspiration pneumonia and choking.

If treatment includes the use of a thickener, carers and catering staff should be trained on how to mix fluids with thickeners and prepare foods to the individual IDDSI consistency advised.

Directions on the prescription and MAR chart should advise that the most recent SLT assessment is checked for the consistency required in case there have been any changes between prescriptions. It is important for carers and catering staff to communicate and work together for residents whose liquids require thickening.

## Medication

A Structured Medication Review (SMR) should be requested from your GP or PCN Pharmacy team. Refer to the Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes: Structured Medication Reviews.

For residents on more complex medication regimes, refer to the Medicines Optimisation in Care Homes (MOCH) resources:

- SMR Pathway, and
- Referral to the MOCH team,

The MOCH resources can be found on the NHS Frimley ICB website, [NHS Frimley - MOCH \(Medicines Optimisation in Care Homes\) resources \(SMR/referrals\) \(icb.nhs.uk\)](https://www.icb.nhs.uk/medicines-optimisation-in-care-homes-resources-smr/referrals).

Referrals to the MOCH team can also be made using:

- DXS,
- secure email to [frimleyicb.moch@nhs.net](mailto:frimleyicb.moch@nhs.net).

All medications should be reviewed, using shared decision making, to ensure they are safe, necessary, appropriate, suitable for, and can be taken safely by, a resident with dysphagia.

Liquid formulations may require a thickening agent to enable the resident to take them safely and so may not be appropriate.

An alternative formulation, route of administration or medication might be more appropriate.

Queries relating to compatibility of a thickener and medication should be checked with a pharmacist.

## Record Keeping

Records should be accurate and up to date and kept as detailed in the care home medicines policy.

An individual management plan for each resident prescribed a thickener should contain clearly documented details of the consistency of fluids and foods to be offered as advised by an SLT.

It is best practice:

- to add details of the IDDSI Level fluids should be thickened to, or
- to add 'see the latest SLT assessment for consistency required'

to the directions on the prescription and the Medicines Administration Record (MAR) chart.

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- NICE SC1 Managing medicines in care homes  
[Overview | Managing medicines in care homes | Guidance | NICE](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/sc1)
- Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes: Medicines' storage  
[file \(icb.nhs.uk\)](https://www.icb.nhs.uk)
- Prescqiipp Bulletin 188: Care homes - Assisting people with swallowing difficulties  
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- SPS: Using thickeners of different types for patients with swallowing difficulties  
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- NHS Frimley – Care Homes: Good Practice Guidance for Care Homes  
[NHS Frimley - Care Homes \(icb.nhs.uk\)](https://www.icb.nhs.uk)
- Guidance for Prescribing Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia  
[file \(icb.nhs.uk\)](https://www.icb.nhs.uk)

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# Appendix 1: The International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) framework



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