DYSPHAGIA EARLY DETECTION INITIATIVE

Understanding Thickened Liquids

An honest guide to what thickener does, what it doesn't, and the questions worth asking

Thickened liquids are one of the most commonly prescribed strategies recommended when someone has dysphagia, and also one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of dysphagia management.

What it DOES

A thickener slows liquid down. Thin liquids move fast, and weakened muscles may not react in time to protect the airway. Thicker liquids give someone's body more time to respond. For some patients, that can meaningfully reduce the risk of thin liquids entering the airway.

What it does NOT do

It **DOES NOT eliminate aspiration risk**. It does not strengthen any muscles. It does not treat the underlying problem. And it cannot protect you from aspirating your own saliva.

Things to consider with thickener:

Many people will drink less when using thickened liquid simply because they dislike the texture. Less fluid intake increases the risk of dehydration. With the risk of dehydration comes the risk of electrolyte imbalance, the onset of UTI, fecal impaction, and increased risk of falls. In these instances, your quality of life can really decrease. Recent research on a variety of populations, including IBM, has raised questions about whether thickened liquids reduce risk as reliably as the medical field once assumed.

Thickener is a tool, not a treatment plan.

A thickened-liquid recommendation should ONLY come from an objective instrumental evaluation. If you have not had an MBSS or a FEES, we do not know if you are silently aspirating the thickened liquid. Just because you don't cough when you try a thickened liquid does NOT mean it is safe.

Questions to ask your SLP

- What did my evaluation show that led to this recommendation?
- Is the thickener actually reducing my aspiration risk, and how do we know?
- What thickness level am I on, and what would it take to move toward thinner liquids?
- Are there rehabilitation options that could improve my swallow itself?
- When will we re-evaluate?

If you're on thickener and nobody has looked at your swallow recently, that's your cue to ask for an updated evaluation today.

Educational content developed for the Dysphagia Early Detection Initiative by
Meaghan Arnold & SSNR for Myositis Support and Understanding

This handout does not replace individualized evaluation by a speech-language pathologist or your medical team.

Myositis Support and Understanding