

The use of thickened fluids in the management of drinking and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia)

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) are recognised as the profession most likely to lead on the assessment and management of swallowing difficulties (dysphagia). Other healthcare professionals and those who support people with swallowing difficulties may find the following information useful. It provides a summary of the latest RCSLT position on the use of thickened fluids and should be reviewed when considering using thickened fluids in the treatment and management of service users with dysphagia.

Key points

- There is insufficient evidence to conclude definitively that thickened fluids can prevent or reduce dysphagia-related complications of aspiration pneumonia, dehydration, death, or that they can improve quality of life.
- A personalised care approach should be used with decisions about thickened fluids carefully considered only after comprehensive assessment and informed consent.
- When a service user uses thickened fluids, a trial and ongoing review will allow for monitoring of any potential adverse effects and ascertain whether continued use is necessary. This is something an SLT can assist with.
- Thickened fluids are better considered as one of several dysphagia management tools.

Potential benefits of thickened fluids

- Reduced aspiration and negative aspiration-related health consequences
- Improved oral motor control
- Taste preference over water
- Improved hydration
- Opportunity to continue drinking fluids and / or engage in dysphagia rehabilitation in the short term, where drinking thin fluids is unmanageable
- May increase participation or enable service users to re-engage in meaningful, ritualistic, spiritual or symbolic drinking-related activities
- May support dignity and quality of life through improvement of oral motor control

In addition, for children:

- Reduced hospital admissions for respiratory problems
- Improved quality of life, fluid intake and resistance to feeding
- Reduced symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, and apnoeas



Potential adverse effects of thickened fluids

- Reduced fluid intake
- Dehydration and urinary tract infections
- Feeling of fullness leading to reduced appetite
- Unpleasant or altered taste and texture
- Increased thirst
- Altered bowel habits and increased risk of necrotising enterocolitis in infants
- Discontinuation of breastfeeding
- Delayed or reduced absorption of certain medications
- Increased swallowing effort
- Increase in post-swallow residue
- Increased risk of adverse pulmonary events from aspirating thickened fluids
- Worsening emotional well-being, health-related and social-related quality of life

Recommending thickened fluids whilst awaiting SLT assessment or for long periods without ongoing monitoring or planned follow up has the potential for increasing the likelihood of unwarranted adverse effects.

Things to consider

- A holistic assessment of eating, drinking and swallowing must be undertaken by a dysphagia trained practitioner, such as an SLT, before considering thickened fluids.
- Assessments should be carried out promptly after identifying the person has eating, drinking or swallowing difficulties.
- Thickened fluids have risks as well as benefits which should be considered for every service user.
- Thickened fluids are one of several interventions for dysphagia.
- Service users on long term thickened fluids need to be monitored.
- Thickened fluids will still be appropriate for some service users but this decision is person specific.

Further information

For further information on the management of dysphagia and how speech and language therapists can help please visit [rcslt.org](https://www.rcslt.org) or email info@rcslt.org.