Thick Fluids

Thick fluids are needed for people with feeding and/or swallowing problems.

Thickening the fluids you drink makes swallowing safer because it reduces the risk of fluid going down the wrong way, into the lungs.

A fluid is any liquid such as water or juice. **Thin fluids need to be thickened.** You can thicken fluids with a commercial thickener, which you can buy at a pharmacy.

A fluid can also be a food that melts at body temperature, such as Jell-O® or ice cream. These fluids can’t be thickened.

**Examples of thin fluids:**
- Au jus
- Broth
- Buttermilk
- Coffee
- Eggnog
- Fruit drinks, sports drinks
- Fruit juice
- Gravy (thickness may vary)
- Ice
- Ice cream
- Jell-O®
- Liquid medicines
- Nutrition supplement drinks such as Boost® or Ensure®
- Milk
- Milkshake
- Pop
- Popsicles
- Sauces
- Sherbet
- Slushy drinks
- Spirits, wine, and other alcoholic drinks
- Strained or blended soup
- Syrup
- Tea
- Vegetable juice (except tomato juice)
- Water
- 10–36% milk fat (M.F.) table cream

**Types of thick fluids**

There are three types of thick fluids. Below is a description of how fluids should look when thickened to each type.

**Nectar Thick (mildly thick)**
- Fluid runs freely off the spoon but leaves a thin coating on the spoon.
- Fluid should pour like most types of fruit nectar.

**Honey Thick (moderately thick)**
- Fluid slowly drips in dollops off the end of the spoon.
- Fluids should pour slowly, like liquid honey.

**Pudding Thick (extremely thick)**
- Fluid sits on the spoon and does not flow off.
- Fluids should be as thick as pudding.

**Your type of thick fluid is:**

Thicken **all** your fluids to the type written on the line above. This includes all fluids you drink with meals and snacks.

If you have any questions about thickening fluids or fluid medicines, talk to your swallowing team.
Things to keep in mind

- Check that the food or fluid is the right thickness for you. Some brands of products may vary in thickness, like juice, yogurt, applesauce, or custard.
- Avoid foods that melt, such as ice cream, milkshakes, slushy drinks, Jell-O®, or sherbet. These foods can’t be thickened.
- Don’t use gelatin to thicken your foods. Gelatin thins as it warms up. It is all right to have gelatin listed as an ingredient in foods like yogurt.
- Don’t freeze thick fluids. If you choose to freeze thick fluids, you will need to thicken the fluid again to the right consistency after it has thawed.
- Don’t eat foods that have a mixed consistency. A food with mixed consistency has both thin fluid and solid foods together in one bite. Examples of foods not to eat:
  - Juicy, fresh fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes, watermelon, oranges, and grapes (these fruits release water, which would be considered a thin fluid)
  - Fruit in Jell-O®
  - Canned fruit in liquid
  - Cold cereal and milk
  - Soups with pieces of vegetables, meat, pasta, or grains
  - Drain the juice or syrup from canned fruit.
  - Eat smooth, hot cereal instead of cold cereal with milk.
  - Blend or strain soups until smooth. Some soups may need to be thickened to the right consistency as per the directions given by your swallowing team.
  - Don’t add crackers or bread to your soup.
  - Gravy or sauces may need to be thickened.
  - If you take fluid medicines, talk to your pharmacist or your healthcare team about how to take them safely.

Foods or fluids that naturally fit

Some fluids or foods may naturally be the right thickness. They may not need to be thickened. It is important to always check and make sure that the food or fluid is the right thickness for you.

Nectar Thick (mildly thick)
- Yogurt that is smooth or has soft fruit pieces.
  Note: smooth yogurts may vary in thickness from nectar to pudding, depending on brand and type.
- Some brands of tomato juice such as Heinz®.
- Fruit nectar such as McCain Prune Nectar®.

Honey Thick (moderately thick)
- Yogurt that is smooth or has soft fruit pieces.
  Note: Smooth yogurts may vary in thickness from nectar to pudding, depending on brand and type.
- Liquid honey.

Pudding Thick (extremely thick)
- Yogurt that is smooth or has soft fruit pieces.
  Note: Smooth yogurts may vary in thickness from nectar to pudding, depending on brand and type.
- Smooth pudding.
- Smooth cooked cereal, prepared according to package directions.
- Pureed foods that sit on the spoon and don’t flow off.
Commercial thickeners

- You can buy or order commercial thickeners from a pharmacy.
- Different fluids will need different amounts of commercial thickener. **Always follow the directions on the commercial thickener container to thicken your fluids to the right type.**
- The following can have an effect on the amount of commercial thickener needed to thicken your fluids:
  - temperature (hot fluids versus cold fluids)
  - acidity level (such as cranberry juice versus apple juice)
  - fluid type (such as alcohol and colas—they bubble and may not thicken)

**Always follow the commercial thickener directions!**

Examples of commercial thickeners:
- Resource® ThickenUp®, ThickenUp Clear®
- Simply Thick®
- Thick It®

Tips for thickening fluids

- Some thickeners turn lumpy when added to hot fluids, so you may need to add it into cold liquid before you heat it up.
- Stir your liquid and thickener well so you don’t get any lumps and to make sure it is the right consistency.
- Extra thick fluids may be made and stored in the refrigerator for up to 2 days. Stir well and check if the thick fluid is still the right consistency before using.
- When making large amounts of thick fluids, use a blender or food processor to blend the liquid and thickener together.

- Commercial thickeners tend to thicken over time, so it may not look very thick at first. Wait at least 5 minutes before adding more thickener. Some commercial thickeners take longer to thicken, depending on the brand.
- Pre-thickened beverages such as Resource® thickened beverages are available in Nectar thick and Honey thick for water, juice, and milk. Check with your pharmacy if you would like to buy these.

If you have tried the fluid choices on this handout and would still like more choices and more information, talk to your swallowing team.

Remember:
- Drink enough thick fluids so that you are not thirsty.
- Drink at least 6–8 cups (1.5 L–2 L) of thick fluids including water, milk, and 100% juice every day.