

Thickened Liquids in Patients with Dysphagia

People who have difficulty swallowing **THIN LIQUIDS** often benefit from drinking thickened liquids. Drinking thickened liquids can help prevent choking and stop fluid from entering the lungs in **very specific swallowing problems**.

Recommending thickened liquids is **ONE TOOL** in the speech pathologist toolbox to manage dysphagia. **It is NOT an appropriate recommendation for every patient with dysphagia.**
ONE TOOL DOES NOT FIT ALL!

TAKE HOME MESSAGE: THICKER IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER!

WHEN IN DOUBT, CONSULT SPEECH PATHOLOGY FOR A SWALLOW EVALUATION 😊

TYPES OF THICK LIQUIDS (Based on liquid viscosity):

1. **NECTAR-THICK LIQUIDS:** are easily pourable and are comparable to thicker cream soups.
2. **HONEY-THICK LIQUIDS:** are slightly thicker, are less pourable, and drizzle from a cup or bowl, like honey.
3. **PUDDING-THICK LIQUIDS:** hold their own shape. They are not pourable and are usually eaten with a spoon.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDING THICKENED LIQUIDS:

- **Thin liquids move fast.** They can fall out of the mouth and spill into the throat.
- Thin liquids are **unpredictable**, difficult to control, and may spill to the airway before the swallow reflex is initiated (Logemann, 1983). **Requires faster closure of the vocal cords.**
- Thickened liquids are a **cohesive bolus** that may be **easier to control** (Hamlet, et al., 1996).
- **Thickened liquids slow down the bolus flow** to compensate for a delayed swallow and reduced airway closure (Clave, et al., 2006; Logemann, et al., 2008).
- **A thicker bolus delays transit** through mouth and pharyngeal cavities (Dantas, et al., 1989, 1990).

RISKS:

- **RISK OF DEHYDRATION**
- Need increased **intra-bolus pressure** orally and at the upper esophageal sphincter (UES). (Dantas, et al., 1989). This is **DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE FOR PATIENTS WHO HAVE HAD XRT TO THE HEAD & NECK OR HAVE WEAKNESS FROM NEUROLOGICAL PROBLEMS (STROKE, PD, MS).**
- **More tongue pressure** needed to initiate the swallow.
- **MORE RESIDUE = POTENTIAL ASPIRATION AFTER SWALLOW. THICKER LIQUIDS INCREASE RESIDUE AND CAUSE MORE ASPIRATION/PENETRATION** (Hind, et al, 2012).
- **WORSE OUTCOMES:** Patients who aspirated THICK LIQUIDS HAVE A HIGHER RISK OF DEVELOPING PNEUMONIA VS THINNER CONSISTENCIES.

BENEFITS:

- **Decrease Aspiration:** In patients with neurosensory delay in swallow function, decreased airway protection (TVC paralysis, airway masses), decreased timing and coordination of airway closure and swallow initiation (COPD, Lung Fibrosis).
- **Thick liquids may give the patient more time** to perform additional swallows or other swallowing strategies.