

## Guidance for Prescribing Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia

### Background

Thickeners are used to thicken fluids for people with dysphagia. Thickening fluids slows down the transit time through the mouth and throat and allows time for airway closure which can help reduce the risk of aspiration and therefore facilitate a safer swallow. Advice to thicken fluids will depend on the individual's type of dysphagia and will be described using the new [International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative \(IDDSI\)](#) terminology.


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

### Which Thickener Should Be Prescribed?

**Resource ThickenUp Clear®** is the preferred choice thickener in NHS Frimley. This is a clear gum-based thickener and is a safer, more palatable and more cost-effective product in comparison to starch-based thickeners.

### How Much Thickener Should Be Prescribed?

The guidance below is based on a daily fluid intake of 2000ml. Consider an initial prescription of 3 tins and adjust according to the patient's average intake.

Resource ThickenUp Clear®	Presentation	IDDSI Level	No. of scoops per 200ml fluid	No. of tins / 28 days	Total weight / 28 days
 <b>PIP Code: 355-4433</b>	127g tin with 1.2g scoop	Level 1 (slightly thick)	1	3	381g
		Level 2 (mildly thick)	2	6	762g
		Level 3 (moderately thick)	4	11	1397g
		Level 4 (extremely thick)	6	16	2032g

### Key Recommendations (see also 'Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia: Frequently Asked Questions')

- ✓ If a prescriber feels it is clinically indicated to prescribe thickener prior to SLT assessment, **you MUST still refer the patient for SLT assessment, even if symptoms appear to improve. Advise SLT on the referral that you have prescribed thickener in the interim**
- ✓ Review monthly quantities prescribed to avoid waste and overprescribing
- ✓ Consider adding the required IDDSI consistency descriptor to the prescription instructions e.g. 'Thicken all fluids to IDDSI level 2'
- ✓ Advise patients to follow manufacturer's instructions for usage and to store thickeners safely to avoid risk of accidental ingestion ([patient safety alert](#))
- ✓ It is recommended that all residents requiring thickener within a care home are prescribed the same brand to reduce risk of usage error
- ✓ Review medications to ensure they are suitable if the patient requires thickened fluids
- ✗ Avoid prescribing sachets of thickener unless specifically requested by SLT
- ✗ Avoid prescription of pre-thickened drinks e.g. Slo-drinks, Fresubin Thickened, Nutrilis Complete unless recommended by a dietitian

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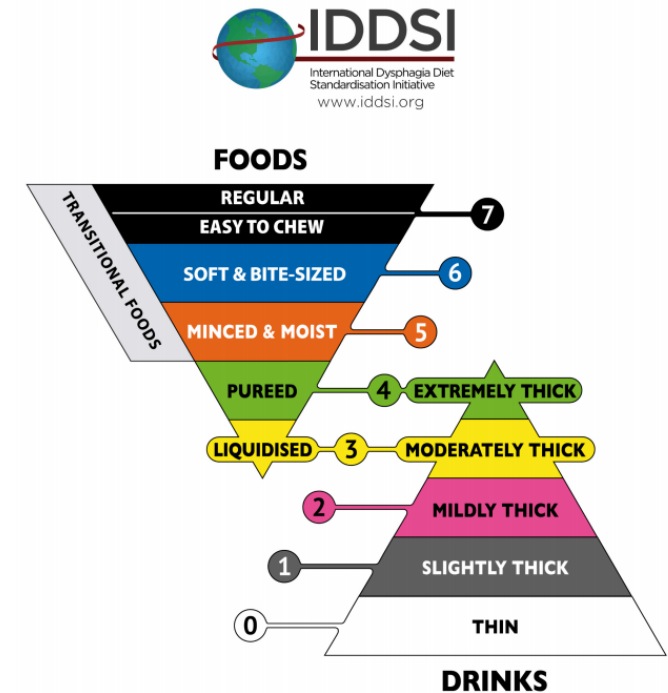
## Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia

### What is IDDSI?

In 2018 the [International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative \(IDDSI\)](https://www.iddsi.org/) was adopted across the UK to support safer modification of food and drink in all care settings following a [patient safety alert](#). The framework consists of a continuum of eight levels (0-7) where drinks are measured from Levels 0-4, while foods are measured from Levels 3-7. It provides a common terminology to describe food textures and drink thickness, as well as IDDSI testing methods to confirm the characteristics of a food or fluid at time of testing.

The new IDDSI terminology replaces 'stage' descriptors that were previously used to describe fluids. The table below summarises the changes:

Previous Terminology	IDDSI Level	Description
Normal	<b>Level 0</b>	Thin
Naturally Thick	<b>Level 1</b>	Slightly Thick
Stage 1	<b>Level 2</b>	Mildly Thick
Stage 2	<b>Level 3</b>	Moderately Thick
Stage 3	<b>Level 4</b>	Extremely Thick



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@ <https://iddsi.org/framework/>

### What is the difference between starch-based and gum-based thickeners?

**Starch-based thickeners** tend to have an undesirable flavour, a grainy texture and form lumps when mixed with fluids which may increase risk of choking and reduce patient compliance. They usually continue to thicken the fluid they are added to, meaning that the consistency does not remain stable. For these reasons, starch-based thickeners are no longer recommended. Examples of starch-based thickeners include Thick & Easy®, Resource ThickenUp®, Nutilis®.

**Gum based thickeners** are preferred due to their improved safety aspects and palatability. Increased palatability can improve compliance and therefore patient hydration. Gum-based products are normally identified by use of the word 'Clear' in the product name e.g. Resource ThickenUp Clear®, Nutilis Clear®, Thick & Easy Clear®.

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## Thickeners for Adults with Dysphagia: Frequently Asked Questions

### Q1. Can I prescribe thickener for patients presenting with issues swallowing fluids without a SLT assessment?

Thickener is not always indicated for fluid swallowing difficulties and can potentially make some swallowing difficulties worse. Use of thickener may reduce fluid intake if the patient is non-compliant, leading to dehydration and associated problems. In addition, it may also reduce quality of life.

If a prescriber feels it is clinically indicated to prescribe thickener prior to SLT assessment, it is suggested to trial IDDSI Level 1 initially whilst monitoring for signs of ongoing aspiration and consider increasing to IDDSI Level 2 if symptoms persist. **You MUST still refer the patient for SLT assessment, even if symptoms appear to improve with thickener; please advise SLT on the referral that you have prescribed thickener in the interim.** This is to ensure that thickener is indicated and that the correct IDDSI Level is prescribed for the patient. This follows the guidelines set by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. Care homes can refer to the SLT team directly but may wish to discuss the referral with the patients' GP beforehand.

Any patient with possible dysphagia should be assessed by SLT. Symptoms may include:

- Choking, excessive throat clearing or regular coughing when eating and/or drinking
- Voice regularly sounding wet/'gurgly' when eating and/or drinking
- Recurrent chest infections
- Gasping for breath when eating and/or drinking
- Change of colour in the face when eating and/or drinking

### Q2. A patient has been discharged from hospital with a prescription for thickener, what should I do?

Patients discharged with thickener will need a long-term repeat prescription unless otherwise directed by SLT. All patients living in NHS Frimley should be prescribed **Resource ThickenUp Clear®** (PIP Code 335-4433) unless advised otherwise by the assessing SLT.

### Q3. Should all residents in the same care home that are prescribed thickener for their fluids be prescribed the same product?

**Yes.** It is recommended that all residents within one care home are prescribed the same brand of thickener. The use of different brands in a care home is high risk as the products differ in amounts of powder required and mixing directions. Use of more than one brand could lead to reduced familiarity of the products leading to incorrect usage, inadequate thickening and increased risk of patient harm. All residents should have details of the thickened consistency required (IDDSI level) documented in their patient record and care plan.

### Q4. Should I prescribe thickener for modifying food e.g. puree food?

**No.** The main indication for thickener is to thicken fluids only. There are food thickening products that can be bought from a supermarket or via a catering contract if used in a residential setting.

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### Q5. Should I prescribe tins or sachets of thickener?

**Tins** of thickener should be prescribed as they are more cost effective than boxes of individual sachets. Only tins should be prescribed in a care home. Sachets may be useful for some mobile patients who are regularly outside of their home where a sachet would be easier to carry than a tin. This will be assessed by SLT on an individual basis. Sachets should not be prescribed unless specifically recommended by SLT with supporting justification.

### Q6. Should I adjust the quantity of thickener provided to patients based on their fluid intake?

**Yes.** The quantity of tins suggested in the guidance is based on a daily fluid intake of 2000ml. Suitable adjustments should be made based on the average amount of fluid the patient drinks daily to reduce the risk of over/under-prescribing. Consider an initial prescription of 3 tins and adjust according to the patient's average fluid intake.

### Q7. Can medications be thickened with thickener?

- Thickeners are not licensed as medicines. Many are classed as Food for Special Medical Purposes (FSMPs) intended for the dietary management, under medical supervision, of individuals with dysphagia.
- Mixing medication in a thickened fluid is an unlicensed method of administration. Patient response to drugs administered via unlicensed routes can be unpredictable. Drugs may have a different therapeutic effect or onset or duration of action. Drugs given by an unlicensed route are the responsibility of the prescriber.
- Patients with dysphagia should have a structured medication review to ensure all medication is suitable. Liquid medicine formulations should not be used routinely as it is difficult to check fluid consistency, which can affect whether the medicine is swallowed safely. Consider discontinuation of a medication if no longer appropriate or change to an alternative formulation or route of administration.
- All decisions on medication administration should be made on an individual patient basis and clearly documented. SLTs are not able to advise on how to thicken medications. **Please contact the Medicines Optimisation Team for support and advice.**
- Please note that thickener products can affect the absorption and bioavailability of oral medications. See MHRA alert advising against mixing PEG laxatives with starch thickeners [here](#) (instead they can be mixed with gums). For further information on the thickening of medications, see the following articles [here](#).

### Q8. Can I prescribe thickener for paediatric patients?

- Children under 3 years old: **Instant Carobel®** may be requested by a SALT or Paediatric Dietitian in special circumstances (e.g, children with complex medical conditions who are at risk of choking or dysphagia).
- Children over 3 years old can be prescribed Resource Thicken up Clear® as listed above.

***This document reflects the literature at the time of writing. For further advice contact your local SALT or Medicines Optimisation Team.***

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