

In the **THICK OF IT**

What You Need to Know About Thickened Liquids

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Why are some people with HD told to drink only thickened liquids?

Coughing, choking, and having beverages “go the wrong way” is a common problem for people with HD. This is most likely to happen with thin liquids, like water, because these are the most difficult for the throat muscles to control during swallowing. An evaluation by a Speech Pathologist can determine why this is happening and recommend the consistency of liquids that would be best to decrease this problem.

Having problems with swallowing foods or beverages is sometimes called “dysphagia”. The National Dysphagia Diet (NDD) is the standard of care for adjusting diets for people with swallowing problems. Once you have a recommended diet consistency, a Registered Dietitian (RD) can use the NDD guidelines to help you create a menu that incorporates your favorite foods in a way that reduces your risk of coughing or choking.

Thickened liquids are an important part of a diet for safer swallowing. Some descriptive terms for thickened liquid consistencies that you may hear include: “nectar thick,” “honey thick,” and “spoon thick.”

“Nectar thick” liquids have slightly more body than thin liquids, but still can pour easily. Some examples include tomato juice, pear nectar, peach nectar, apricot nectar, and some bottled fruit smoothies.

“Honey thick” liquids are liquids that pour slowly, like honey or molasses. When you tip a spoonful of a “honey thick” liquid, the liquid slowly drizzles off. An example would be a very thick milkshake.

“Spoon thick” liquids you can eat with a spoon, like pudding or custard. If you tip a spoonful of a “spoon thick” liquid, it will come off the spoon very slowly or not at all. Spoon thick liquids are too thick to drink with a straw.

If I need thickened liquids, how can get them?

Many stores sell brick packs of pre-thickened liquids that are labeled as to the specific consistency of the product. They look much like a typical juice box and are handy to grab when you’ll be away from home. Some examples of pre-thickened liquids available in this form are milk, lemonade, fruit juices, and even thickened water. If you are unable to find these at a store near you, they can also be purchased on-line and delivered to your home.

You may prefer to create your own customized thickened beverages. If so, there are products that you can add to any liquid you choose to achieve the desired consistency. Some examples are “Thicken Up” and “Thick It”. These are widely available in drug stores or can also be purchased on-line. Be sure to follow the package directions for best results.

If you are already a master manipulator of food consistencies, you may want to try some other tactics for thickening your liquids. For example, for shakes or smoothies you may want to add pureed fruit instead of juice, or maybe a mashed banana. Adding powdered banana is also an option. Be sure to blend it thoroughly for the best consistency and taste.

For hot liquids such as soup, try instant mashed potatoes or instant baby rice cereal, stirred in while the soup is heating. Cornstarch or flour can also be used to thicken hot liquids, but should not be added directly because they can cause lumps. Dissolve the flour or cornstarch in a little cold water first, or stir it into melted butter or oil (what the French call a roux), before adding it to your product.

Once you know the basics, you can experiment to individualize the best consistency for you. Enjoy all you favorite flavors and swallow safely!

1. [National Dysphagia Diet](#): Standardization for Optimal Care. National Dysphagia Diet Task Force (2002). Chicago, IL: American Dietetic Association.



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