

## Guide to Prescribing Thickeners for Adults

Thickeners are used to thicken liquids to various consistencies for patients with dysphagia, slowing the rate of transit and allowing more time to coordinate the swallowing process safely. This then reduces the risk of fluids entering the lungs causing serious complications e.g. chest infections or aspiration pneumonia and can help to reduce hospital admissions, hospital stays, and death.<sup>1</sup>

**Thickeners should usually only be prescribed on the recommendation of a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) following a diagnosis of dysphagia.** During the telephone triage of patients the clinical information provided may lead the SLT to a decision that a thickener is required prior to a face to face assessment taking place. In most cases, all fluids consumed should be thickened.

### International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) descriptors

SLT advice will depend on the patient's degree and type of dysphagia. **All fluid consistencies are classified using the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) descriptors: level 1 (slightly thick), level 2 (mildly thick), level 3 (moderately thick) and level 4 (extremely thick).**

### Types of Thickeners: gum based safer than starch based

In recent years thickeners have evolved from the original starch based format to a new range of gum based thickeners.

**Starch based thickeners** can be unstable and continue to thicken over time if left to stand, however if mixed with saliva the enzyme amylase breaks down the thickener which thins the fluid, reduces the effectiveness and **poses a safety risk** to the patient. Starch based thickeners also have a grainy texture and can form lumps when mixed with fluids. The overall reduced palatability of starch based thickeners can reduce adherence and patient hydration.<sup>2</sup>

**Gum based thickeners are more stable over time and are resistant to amylase and therefore safer.** They are less grainy, have a smoother texture and are clear, which makes them more appealing and palatable to the patient. Increased palatability can lead to improved adherence and patient hydration.<sup>2</sup>

### **Key Message:**

**Barnsley Area Prescribing Committee supports the use of a gum based thickener as a first line option when a thickener is indicated. From October 29<sup>th</sup> 2018, gum based thickeners have been used first line for new patients and the IDDSI descriptors for fluids have been implemented. Thick and Easy Clear® has been agreed as the gum-based thickener of choice in Barnsley for use in both primary and secondary care. Should this not be suitable, an alternative gum based thickener on the Barnsley formulary may be considered.**

## Key Prescribing Points

- **Thickeners should usually only be prescribed on the recommendation of a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT)** following a diagnosis of dysphagia.
- In most cases, all fluids consumed should be thickened.
- **Thickeners should be prescribed by the tin as this is the most cost effective option.** Sachets should **not** be prescribed.
- Ensure that the correct thickener is selected. Gum-based thickeners will be used first line for new patients and can be identified by the suffix “- **Clear**”.
- For patients currently receiving starch based thickeners, a switch to a gum based thickener should not be made without SLT input/re-training because the method of use and preparation can be significantly different. Patients who are currently using a starch based thickener and are considered stable on this can remain on their current thickener. Referral to Speech & Language Therapy will continue to be based on clinical need. Patients admitted to Barnsley Hospital will be reviewed and changed to a gum based thickener.
- Advise patients that the manufacturer’s instructions must be followed and the **scoop provided should be used** to enable the correct texture to be achieved. **Scoop sizes can vary between products and it is important that the correct scoop is used.**
- To align with the IDDSI framework, changes have recently been made to the scoop size of various thickeners which will affect how many scoops are required to thicken drinks.
- For gum-based thickeners, the thickener should be **added to a dry cup and the liquid poured in afterwards**, stirring well and allowing time to thicken before serving. Extra thickener should not be added afterwards.
- Consider adding the required IDDSI consistency descriptor to the prescription instructions, where it has been specified by the SLT.
- Prescribe one or two tins initially to ensure patient acceptability and ensure that the quantity prescribed thereafter is appropriate (see below).
- Ideally the same brand of thickener should be used for all residents in care homes. This will help to minimise the risk of errors and wastage.

The amount of thickener required by each patient will vary and is dependent on how much fluid they drink and the consistency which is required. Suggested on-going minimum quantities for one month are included in the table below (quantity based on recommendation of 1600mls fluid/day):

Gum based thickener	Cost per tin <sup>3</sup>	Consistency (IDDSI descriptors)	Suggested quantity for 28 days	
			Number of Tins (Cost)	Grams
<b>Thick &amp; Easy Clear<sup>®</sup></b>  <b>(126g Tin)</b>  <b>1 tin provides approximately</b>  <b>90 x 1.4g scoops</b>	<b>£6.50</b>	<b>Level 1</b> (Slightly thick) 1 scoop per 200ml fluid	<b>3 tins (£19.50)</b>	<b>378g</b>
		<b>Level 2</b> (Mildly thick) 2 scoops per 200ml fluid	<b>5 tins (£32.50)</b>	<b>630g</b>
		<b>Level 3</b> (Moderately thick) 3 scoops per 200ml fluid	<b>8 tins (£52.00)</b>	<b>1008g</b>
		<b>Level 4</b> (Extremely thick) 6 scoops per 200ml fluid	<b>15 tins (£97.50)</b>	<b>1890g</b>

## References

1. Cichero J.A.Y. Thickening agents used for dysphagia management: effect on bioavailability of water, medication and feelings of satiety. Nutrition Journal 2013; 12: 54. <http://www.nutritionj.com/content/12/1/54> <Accessed 04.12.20>.
2. PrescQIPP Bulletin 100. May 2015. <https://www.prescqipp.info/umbraco/surface/authorisedmediasurface/index?url=%2fmedia%2f1685%2fb100-thickeners-for-dysphagia-briefing-20.pdf> <Accessed 04.12.20>.
3. eMIMS. <https://www.mims.co.uk/drugs/nutrition/low-protein-and-miscellaneous-foods/thick-and-easy-clear> <Accessed 04.12.20>