



Position statement on the use of thickened fluids in the management of people with swallowing difficulties

March 2023

Contents

Position statement	3
References	5
Authors	9

Position statement on the use of thickened fluids in the management of people with swallowing difficulties

Within the UK, Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) are recognised as the professionals most likely to lead on the assessment and management of eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia). A group of expert SLTs have developed the following statement to clarify the RCSLT's position on the use of thickened fluids in the management of people with dysphagia. Other dysphagia-trained clinical practitioners may also find it useful to refer to this statement to inform their practice.

The long-standing practice of using commercially and naturally thick fluids is among the most common treatment tools in the management of eating, drinking and swallowing problems. The RCSLT acknowledges that this practice is undergoing increasing scrutiny.

The commonly accepted view is that by flowing more slowly, thickened fluids improve bolus containment and reduce risk of aspiration and cough-related distress, thereby improving safety and comfort. The literature reports that thickened fluids can alter swallow physiology and reduce aspiration. However, there is an absence of evidence that thickened fluids can reduce dysphagia-related complications such as respiratory tract infections, or that they improve health or quality of life outcomes for patients.

The evidence base to date reports a number of potential treatment burdens associated with this approach. These include: increased risk of dehydration and urinary tract infections, reduced health and social-related quality of life, early satiety, unpalatable taste and texture, increased thirst, altered bowel habits, increased risk of oral and pharyngeal residue, impaired bioavailability of certain medications, and increased risk of respiratory tract infections if thickened fluids are aspirated. Patient-reported outcome studies generally indicate a preference against thickened fluids and highlight difficulties with adherence to thickened fluid recommendations.

Clinical practitioners have a responsibility to familiarise themselves with the current literature and explore within their workplaces how their use of thickened fluids aligns with the evidence base. The RCSLT advises that decisions about thickened fluids, as for any intervention, should be made through a process of informed consent following a holistic assessment that includes consideration of the potential impact on health and quality of life. Patients or their proxies must understand what thickened fluid treatment entails, and its potential adverse side effects as well as its potential benefits.

The RCSLT also plans to publish a position paper on the evidence surrounding thickened fluids in clinical practice by the end of 2023.

References

- Ahn, H.J., Chun, M.H. and Lee, J. (2022) 'Compliance and effect of thickener use in dysphagia patients with brain lesions: An observational pilot study', *Medicine (Baltimore)*, 101(38), pp. e30600.
- Bolivar-Prados, M., Rofes, L., Arreola, V., Guida, S., Nascimento, W.V., Martin, A., Vilardell, N., Ortega Fernández, O., Ripken, D., Lansink, M. and Clavé, P., (2019) 'Effect of a gum-based thickener on the safety of swallowing in patients with poststroke oropharyngeal dysphagia', *Neurogastroenterology and Motility*, 31(11), pp. e13695.
- Chambers, E., Jenkins, A. and Mertz Garcia, J. (2017) 'Sensory texture analysis of thickened liquids during ingestion', *Journal of texture studies*, 48(6), pp. 518-529.
- Cichero, J.(2019) 'The Critical Role of Thickeners in the Therapeutic Medical Management of People with Dysphagia', *Regulatory Focus, Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society*.
- Cichero, J.A.Y. (2013) 'Thickening agents used for dysphagia management: effect on bioavailability of water, medication and feelings of satiety', *Nutrition Journal*, 12(1), pp. 54.
- Dion, S., Duivesteyn, J.A., St Pierre, A. & Harris, S.R. (2015) 'Use of thickened liquids to manage feeding difficulties in infants: A pilot survey of practice patterns in Canadian pediatric centers', *Dysphagia*, (30) pp. 457-472.
- Gosa, M., Sschooling, T. & Coleman, J. (2011) 'Thickened liquids as a treatment for children with dysphagia and associated adverse effects', *Infant, child and adolescent nutrition*, 3(6), pp. 344-350.

Hansen, T., Beck, A.M., Kjaesgaard, A. and Poulsen, I. (2022) 'Second update of a systematic review and evidence-based recommendations on texture modified foods and thickened liquids for adults (above 17 years) with oropharyngeal dysphagia', *Clinical nutrition ESPEN*, 49, pp. 551-555.

Krekeler, B.N., Broadfoot, C.K., Johnson, S., Connor, N.P. & Rogus-Pulia, N. (2018), 'Patient adherence to dysphagia recommendations: A systematic review', *Dysphagia*, 33(2), pp. 173-184.

Krummrich, P., Kline, B., Krival, K. and Rubin, M. (2017) 'Parent perception of the impact of using thickened fluids in children with dysphagia', *Pediatric pulmonology*, 52(11), pp. 1486-1494.

Lazenby-Paterson, T. (2020) 'Thickened liquids: do they still have a place in the dysphagia toolkit?', *Current opinion in otolaryngology and head and neck surgery*, 28(3), pp. 145-154.

Leslie, P. & Lisiecka, D. (2022) 'Ethical considerations in the care of people with eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties', *Current opinion in otolaryngology and head and neck surgery*, 30(3), pp. 182-187.

Manrique, Y.J., Sparkes, A.M., Cichero, J.A.Y., Stokes, J.R., Nissen, L.M. & Steadman, K.J. (2016) 'Oral medication delivery in impaired swallowing: thickening liquid medications for safe swallowing alters dissolution characteristics', *Drug development and industrial pharmacy*, 42(9), pp. 1537-1544.

McCurtin, A., Healy, C., Kelly, L., Murphy, F., Ryan, J. & Walsh, J. (2018) 'Plugging the patient evidence gap: what patients with swallowing disorders post-stroke say about thickened liquids', *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 53(1), pp. 30.

McCurtin, A., Boland, P., Kavanagh, M., Lisiecka, D., Roche, C. & Galvin, R.R. (2020) 'Do stroke clinical practice guideline recommendations for the intervention of thickened liquids for aspiration support evidence-based decision making? A systematic review and narrative synthesis', *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 26(6), pp. 1744.

O'Keefe, S.T. (2018) 'Use of modified diets to prevent aspiration in oropharyngeal dysphagia: is current practice justified?', *BMC geriatrics*, 18(1), pp. 167.

Smith, C.H., Jebson, E.M. & Hanson, B. (2014) 'Thickened fluids: Investigation of users' experiences and perceptions', *Clinical Nutrition*, 33(1), pp. 171-174.

Steele, C.M., Alsanei, W.A., Ayanikalath, S., Barbon, C.E.A., Chen, J., Cichero, J.A.Y., Coutts, K., Dantas, R.O., Duivestein, J., Giosa, L., Hanson, B., Lam, P., Lecko, C., Leigh, C., Nagy, A., Namasivayam, A.M., Nascimento, W.V., Odendaal, I., Smith, C.H. & Wang, H. (2015) 'The influence of food texture and liquid consistency modification on swallowing physiology and function: A systematic review', *Dysphagia*, 30(1), pp. 2-26.

Steele, S.J., Ennis, S.L. & Dobler, C.C. (2021) 'Treatment burden associated with the intake of thickened fluids', *Breathe (Lausanne, Switzerland)*, 17(1), pp. 1-6.

Stewart, A. & Burr, S. (2021) 'Thickened liquids: do they still have a place in the paediatric dysphagia toolkit?', *Current opinion in otolaryngology and head and neck surgery*, 29 (3), pp. 194-199.

Swan, K., Speyer, R., Heijnen, B.J., Wagg, B. & Cordier, R. (2015) 'Living with oropharyngeal dysphagia: effects of bolus modification on health-related quality of life—a systematic review', *Quality of Life Research*, 24(10), pp. 2447-2456.

Yver, C.M., Kennedy, W.P. & Mirza, N. (2018) 'Taste acceptability of thickening agents', *World Journal of Otorhinolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery*, 4(2), pp. 145-147.

Authors

Lead authors	
Lizzie King	Allied Health Professional (AHP) Clinical Lead and Professional Lead for community Adult Speech and Language Therapy, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust
Maya Asir	Clinical Specialist SLT , Evelina London Children’s Hospital / Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust
Tracy Lazenby-Paterson	Speech and Language Therapist, Team Co-ordinator, Community Learning disability service, NHS Lothian

Working group	
Dr Paula Leslie	Pre-Registrant Clinical Scientist, Northern Medical Physics & Clinical Engineering, Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Trust. Non-clinical Problem Based Learning Tutor, Lancaster Medical School, Lancaster University. Specialist SLT, Lancashire & South Cumbria Foundation Trust
Nicholas de Mora-Mieszkowski	Senior Lecturer, Wrexham Glyndwr University, Speech & Language Therapist, Betsi Cadwaldr University Health Board
Dr Jacqueline Benfield	NIHR Clinical Lecturer (post stroke dysphagia) & Clinical Lead Speech and Language Therapist for Stroke, Derbyshire Community Health Service NHS Trust
Sonja Jacobs	Lead SLT for paediatric complex needs / dysphagia, Barts Health NHS Trust
Sandra Robinson	Director of Speech Therapy Works Ltd.
Judith Hibberd	Consultant SLT
Victoria Lacey	Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board
Alex Stewart	Specialist SLT, Great Ormond Street Hospital

Dorothy Clarke	Lecturer in Speech and Language Therapy, University of Ulster
Hazel Warren	Senior Speech and Language Therapist, Nottingham City Care, Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist Notts Healthcare
Mary Halson	Specialist Speech & Language Therapist, Community Learning Disability Team Derbyshire
Elizabeth Barnett	Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Adult Community Team – Care Home Lead

Wider project reference group	
Alice Walton	Senior Rotational Speech and Language Therapist, King's College Hospital
Alison Parsons	Speech and Language Therapist NHS Fife
Anna Davies	Clinical Lead Speech and Language Therapist, Kirklees Adult Learning Disability Health Team (South West Yorkshire Trust)
Anna Rydelewski	Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals
Carly Olczak	Clinical Lead SLT for Stroke, Royal Devon University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Catie-Anne Jessica Visser	Highly Specialist Speech & Language Therapist (Dysphagia) – South Warwickshire University Foundation Trust
Chloe Richards	Band 7 Speech and Language Therapist, Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust
Claire Dunn	Highly Specialist Speech & Language Therapist, NHS Highland
Clair Waterman	Speech and Language Therapist – Surrey and Borders NHS Partnership Trust
Clare Russell	Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist at The Royal Brompton Hospital
Clodagh McBride	Speech and Language Therapist, NHSCT
Deborah Owens	Band 7 Speech and Language Therapist, Dysphagia Lead, Royal Devon University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Diana Mountain	Speech & Language Therapist, Ambito-Beaumont College.
Eve Ferguson	Highly specialist speech and language therapist - critical care and spinal cord injury outreach teams at Northern Care Alliance. Bank contracts at Stockport foundation trust and Lancashire teaching hospitals
Gemma Borkowski	Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Frimley Health Foundation Trust
Hannah Tracey	Speech and language therapist, Southern HSCT, Northern Ireland
Helen Smith	Dysphagia Clinical Lead (Children) Derbyshire Community Health Services and Nottinghamshire Healthcare Foundation Trust
Helen Vernon	Clinical Lead for Stroke Rehabilitation & Clinical Workforce Development Lead for Stroke
James Russell Walker	Speech and Language Therapist—Hywel Dda Health Board
Jane MacGregor	Adult SALT Team Leader, Oldham Care Organisation, Northern Care Alliance.
Janne Schack	Adult Community Speech and Language Therapist and Dysphagia Lead for Dorset HealthCare University NHS Foundation Trust
Jenna Adams	Professional Lead SLT acute/secondary care- Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Wales
Jennifer Worsfold	SLT Professional Lead in Derbyshire Community Healthcare Foundation Trust
Julie Wright	Specialist Speech and Language Therapist
Katherine Latham	Speech and Language Therapist Northern Care Alliance, lecturer Manchester Metropolitan University.
Leo Morgan	Developing Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, NELFT (North East London Foundation NHS Trust)
Lindsey Collins	Senior Dementia Care Consultant and Trainer, University of Bradford

Dr Lisa Everton	Clinical Speech and Language Therapist, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust. AHP Clinical Academic Lead Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. Honorary Assistant Professor (School of Medicine, University of Nottingham)
Luiza Deaconescu	Highly specialist speech and language therapist (stroke); North East London Foundation Trust
Lydia Morgan	North Bristol NHS Trust
Maggie Drury	Speech and Language Therapist South Warwickshire University Foundation Trust
Marianna Cameron	Speech and Language Therapist – North Warwickshire Community Learning Disability Team in Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership Trust
Marianne Collins	Advanced Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Royal Surrey NHS Trust
Megan Williams	Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Gateshead Health NHS Trust
Dr Michelle Lawton	Advanced clinical specialist speech and language therapist, Mid Cheshire NHS Trust. Clinical research fellow, University of Liverpool
Natalie Griffin	Principal Speech and Language Therapist, acute & stroke, London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust
Nicola Harding	Head of Speech and Language Therapy, Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
Olivia Compston	Specialist Speech and Language Therapist adult learning disability, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland
Rebecca Davidson	Clinical Lead Developmental Dysphagia NHS Lanarkshire
Sabrina Eltringham	Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Combined Community and Acute Care Group. Fellow and Associate and Postdoctoral Fellow.
Sarah Aghahowa	Highly specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Bradford Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Sarah Welton	Principal Speech and Language Therapist , Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Trust

Síofra Mulkerrin	Senior Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Sophie Ball	Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Surrey and Sussex Healthcare Trust
Stacie Littlejohn	Adult Inpatient Speech and Language Therapist and team lead, Airedale NHS Foundation Trust

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. As well as providing leadership and setting professional standards, the RCSLT facilitates and promotes research into the field of speech and language therapy, promotes better education and training of speech and language therapists, and provides its members and the public with information about speech and language therapy.

rcslt.org | info@rcslt.org | [@RCSLT](https://www.instagram.com/RCSLT)

