



Health & Safety Alert #19-2-03

Swallowing Problems

This alert discusses the evaluation of swallowing problems and dietary modifications to help address them.

Evaluation of swallowing problem:

- A physician should evaluate an individual who chokes, coughs frequently while eating or drinking, has wheezing respirations or recurrent pneumonia.
- Physician ordered evaluations could include tableside speech therapy evaluation as well as x-ray swallowing study (video fluoroscopy).
- Results of these evaluations may lead to recommendations to:
 - Modify eating habits or use adaptive eating utensils
 - Modify diet texture and/or thicken liquids
 - Consider alternate means of food intake (e.g., feeding tube)

Type and description of diet textures:

- **Regular** This is food served as prepared without changes to texture or size. A person on a regular diet texture will be able to cut his or her food into bite-sized pieces, or will be learning to cut their food into bite-sized pieces and may need some staff assistance to do so.
- **Chopped** This is food served after cutting into one-inch diameter pieces - the size of a quarter. This is used for people who do not cut their own food for each bite because they are impulsive or have other mealtime concerns. People on chopped diet textures should receive their bread and bread products cut into quarter size pieces as well.
- **Ground (also called mechanical soft)** This is served in pieces that are ground beef or rice-sized. This is for people who may lack sufficient teeth for grinding but can do some mashing of their food against the roof of their mouth with their tongue. Food should be ground up using a food processor or blender, and liquids may need to be added to increase moisture content of the food, to bind the food together and to make swallowing easier. Examples of ground foods: Oatmeal, tapioca, cottage cheese and ham-salad. *Note: Some foods (chicken, pork, some fruits and vegetables-those with tough skins or seeds like lima beans, corn peas) are too coarse to grind and are served pureed to individuals on ground diet textures.*
- **Pureed:** This is for people at high risk for airway aspiration or obstruction and who do almost no oral preparation. Pureed foods are prepared similar to ground foods; however, there should be no particles at all in the mix. Some foods are difficult to puree all the particles out, especially some meats (such as sausage casing) and fibrous vegetables (such as broccoli stalk). The pureed food should be smooth, with no lumps. *Examples of pureed food: Yogurt, mashed potatoes, applesauce, and pudding.*

Important: All modifications of diet texture and thickening of liquids must be prescribed by a physician.

Cautions:

- **Meats and salads (raw fruits and vegetables):** These are denser so some individuals may have a separate texture order for meats and salads. A prescribed diet may remove access to meat eaten off of chicken or turkey bones.

- **Bread Products:** People on ground and pureed diet textures need to have their bread products lightly soaked to decrease the possibility of airway aspiration or obstruction. Milk is often the best thing to moisten bread products with, although gravy or the juice from meat is also a good choice. Often you can cut the bread into dime-sized pieces and cover it with meat to soak the bread.
- **Vending Machine Items:** It's important to help individuals make safe choices for themselves when they are at vending machines, and when they eat out in restaurants. Softer foods such as Nutri-grain bars, puffed corn, cheese puffs, 3 Musketeers Bars, soft Hershey Bars, muffins, and cookies that can be soaked are acceptable for people on ground and pureed diet textures after they are properly prepared.
- **Sandwiches:** People on ground and pureed diet textures should eat their sandwich with a spoon or fork. Cut their bread into one-inch pieces and soak it lightly with milk. It is a good idea to mix the meat and bread together with a spoon to obtain a consistent texture like in a casserole.

Thickened Liquids:

Some individuals may need more than just food texture changes to be safe. Thickened liquids may be used to decrease the likelihood of aspiration for someone with difficulty controlling the muscles in his or her mouth and throat. A thickened liquid moves more slowly in the mouth so the person has more time to manipulate it before the liquid reaches his or her throat. Thickened liquids also tend to hold together better, and not spread out all over the mouth. It's easier to gather the liquid up for the swallow. The vast majority of individuals do not require thickened liquids and can swallow non-thickened or thin liquids. A swallowing study is used to determine the type of thickened liquid to use.

Types of Thickened Liquids:

- **Nectar** - slightly thick consistency, which you can feel when you stir it, but if you pour it from a spoon, it still comes off the spoon in drops.
- **Honey** - consistency like honey that is sitting at room temperature. When you pour it from the spoon, it comes off in sheets.
- **Pudding** - thick like pudding, but smooth - should plop off an upside down spoon; should not look like mashed potatoes.

Always remember that if a person needs thickened liquids, all foods must be as thick as the prescribed liquids. Pureed foods may require additional thickening before serving.

Things to Remember about Mixing Thickened Liquids:

- Follow instructions on the thickener packets for thickening liquids, which are not pre-thickened and trust your judgment. The results you get depend on the temperature and type of liquid. You will need to check and be sure the final product looks like it should.
- Mix the liquid first and let it set awhile as you fix the rest of the meal. The liquid will keep getting thicker for about 10 minutes, so be patient.
- Be sure to get all of the lumps out. Stirring constantly and quickly in the same direction for at least 10 seconds helps and use the back of the spoon to mash lumps against the side of the cup. If needed, pour more liquid in slowly.
- Prepared products (pre-thickened liquids) are available.

For further information about feeding tubes, refer to *Feeding Tube Health and Safety Alert*.

To ensure effective communication, please share this with staff who are in the position to best use it in protection of the health and safety of the individuals being served.

For questions or comments regarding the above Alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810.