Thickening Agents: What You Need to Know

Why thicken liquids?
Some infants and children tend to choke on liquids when they drink. Drinking thicker liquids can be safer for them. It can help to thicken the liquid with a thickening “agent.”

What is a thickening agent?
A thickening agent is a gel or powder that’s added to a liquid such as breast milk, formula, juice, milk, or water. It thickens the liquid to a level commonly called either “half nectar,” “nectar,” or “honey thick.”

There are several different types and brands of thickening agents. Commonly used agents are Gelmix, Thick-It, SimplyThick, xanthan gum, and rice or oatmeal infant cereal.

What type of thickener does my child need?
Each thickening agent has different benefits, ingredients, and mixing instructions. Your child’s healthcare provider or feeding therapist will recommend a thickening agent based on:
• Your child’s age and weight
• The liquid that needs to be thickened
• Cost

Your child’s healthcare provider or feeding therapist will give you a recipe and show you the correct way to mix the thickener into your child’s feeding liquid.

How long does my child have to use a thickening agent?
In most cases, a thickening agent is used for a short time — only until your child can swallow safely. Don’t stop thickening your child’s food until your child’s healthcare provider or a feeding therapist can test your child’s ability to swallow without problems.

What if my child has trouble getting a thickened liquid out of a bottle or cup?
Your child’s healthcare provider or feeding therapist has recommended a certain bottle or cup for your child. They have checked to make sure your child can drink the thickened liquid from this cup or bottle. If you find that this has changed, talk with your healthcare provider or feeding therapist. Don’t make any changes unless they say it’s okay. Using less thickening agent, thinning down the liquid, or changing a bottle nipple by cutting it or making the hole bigger can make the liquid move faster. This may not be safe for your child and may increase the risk of choking or breathing liquid into the lungs.

Are there risks with thickening agents?
Yes.
• Infants taking liquids with thickening agents may face an increased risk of a serious disease called necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC). With NEC, the intestines become inflamed and intestinal tissue dies. NEC is a life-threatening condition. Treatment sometimes requires surgery. (See page 2 for more information.)
Are there risks with thickening agents? (Continued)

- The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has reported 22 cases of NEC (including seven deaths) in infants who have taken a thickening agent called SimplyThick. For this reason, SimplyThick should NOT be used in:
  - Preterm infants
  - Infants under 12 months of age
  - Children under the age of 12 years with a history of NEC.
- Infant rice cereal has been used for many years because it’s gluten free and rarely causes allergic reactions. However, some rice products, including infant rice cereals, may contain high levels of arsenic. Arsenic can harm your baby.
  To prevent harm:
  - Feed your child a well-balanced diet that includes many different grains (wheat, oats, quinoa, amaranth, etc.). This will help lower your child’s risk of eating too much of any one food.
  - Feed your child only one serving of rice cereal per day. (A serving is ¼ cup.)
- Thickening agents may also cause side effects such as constipation, gassiness, or loose stools.

CALL YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER RIGHT AWAY if your child has:
- A bloated stomach
- Greenish-tinged vomit
- Bloody stools
- Any behavior or appearance that’s not normal for your child

What do I need to do?

Talk with your child’s healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns about using any of the thickening agents.

If your child is using a thickening agent or has used one recently, watch for signs of NEC in your child. Call your child’s healthcare provider right away if you notice any of the symptoms in the box above.