

Let's Talk About...

Thickening Agents: What you need to know

Why thicken liquids?

Some infants and children tend to choke when they drink. Drinking thickened versions of their normal liquids (such as breastmilk, formula, juice, and water) can be easier to swallow and safer. 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 to bring it to a specific thickness, such as:

- **Slightly thick.** Also called "half nectar." Similar to half and half or coffee creamer.
- **Mildly thick.** Also called "nectar." Similar to creamy soup or egg nog.
- **Moderately thick.** Also called "honey thick." Similar to syrup.

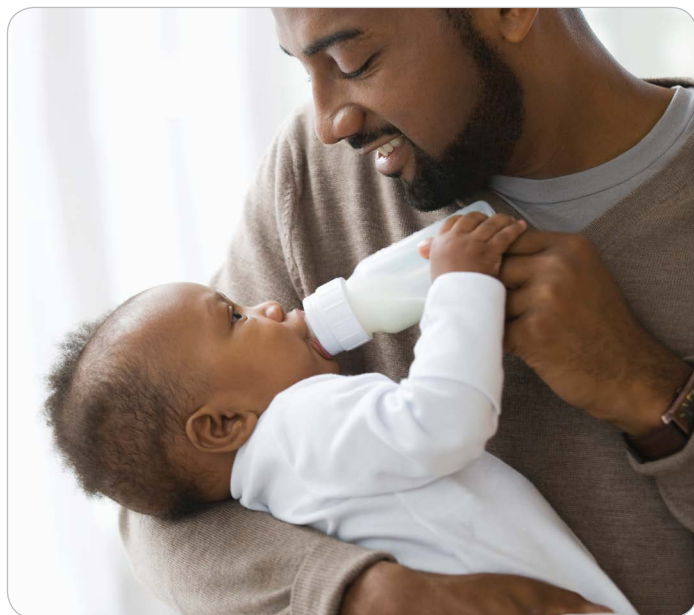
There are several different types and brands of thickening agents. Commonly used agents are Gelmix, Thick-It, SimplyThick, and xanthan gum. Talk with your child's healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns about using any of the thickening agents.

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.



What if my child has problems 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 your child is having trouble drinking, do not try to alter the cup or bottle on your own. 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 inhaling liquid down the wrong tube and into the lungs.

The thickness of a liquid can be tested with a **flow test**. A flow test requires a specific syringe and only takes a few seconds. Sometimes a thickening recipe needs to be adjusted slightly to get the right thickness. Your feeding therapist can teach you how to do a flow test to make sure the thickness of the liquid is correct for your child.

Do thickening agents have risks?

Yes. Infants taking liquids with thickening agents may face increased risk of a serious disease called **necrotizing** [NEH-cruh-tie-zing] **enterocolitis** [en-ter-oh-coh-LIE-tiss], or **NEC**. With NEC, the intestines become inflamed and intestinal tissue dies. NEC is a life-threatening condition, and treatment sometimes requires surgery. See the box “When should I call my doctor?” on the right side of this page for symptoms of NEC.

Is SimplyThick or xanthan gum safe?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has reported 22 cases of **NEC** (including 7 deaths) in infants who have used the thickening agent SimplyThick, which contains xanthan gum.

For this reason, SimplyThick and xanthan gum should NOT be used in:

- Babies under 12 months
- Children under 12 years with a history of NEC

SimplyThick and xanthan gum ARE approved for use in:

- Children of adjusted age 1 year and older with no history of NEC. (Adjusted age refers to the child’s age if they had been born on their predicted due date.)
- Children who are 12 years or older, even if they have a history of NEC

While SimplyThick and xanthan gum are mentioned above because of the reported cases of NEC and related deaths, all thickeners have risks and are specifically made for different age groups. Only use a thickener recommended by your healthcare provider or feeding specialist.

Do thickeners have side effects?

Thickening agents may cause side effects such as constipation, gassiness, or loose stools (soft poop or diarrhea).

How long does my child have to use a thickening agent?

A thickening agent is used until your child can swallow safely. Don’t stop thickening your child’s liquids until a healthcare provider or feeding therapist can test your child’s ability to swallow without problems.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your healthcare provider right away if your child has any of the following symptoms:

- A bloated stomach
- Greenish-colored vomit
- Bloody or dark-colored stools (poop)
- Any behavior or appearance that is not normal for your child

Notes

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