Choosing Thickeners for Your Child

**Why do I need to use a thickener for my child?**
Your child needs to have their liquids thickened. This is to:

- Make their swallowing safer.
- Help prevent liquid from getting into their lungs (called “aspiration”). This can lead to respiratory illness, chronic coughing and not wanting to eat or drink.

Your healthcare provider will consider the risks and benefits of recommending a thickener for your child. Here are some guidelines for choosing the best product for your child.

**What types of thickeners are there?**
Thickeners are food-based products. They include:

- Gum-based products such as xanthan gum or carob bean gum
- Modified food starches such as maltodextrin
- Baby cereals, yogurt or food purees can also be used

**Can all babies and children use thickeners?**
Seattle Children’s does not use thickeners for:

- Infants younger than 2 weeks of age
- Premature infants who are below 42 weeks gestation

We use extra caution using thickeners with children less than 12 months because their digestive system has not fully developed. For all children, their primary healthcare provider should be aware that they are using thickeners. Children with some medical conditions (history or risk of digestive disorders) should only use thickeners under the direction of a specialized healthcare provider.

**Are there side effects of using thickeners?**
Thickeners can:

- Change how your child digests liquids. This depends on the type of thickener, how much is used each day, and your child’s medical status.
- Cause hard, runny or loose stools and change stool color
- Cause more gas or tummy trouble for a few days
- Lead to dehydration if your child does not drink enough thickened liquid

If you notice these things, watch for a few days to see if your child adjusts. If you have concerns about changes in your child’s stools or dehydration (decreased urine output; dark, strong-smelling urine), contact your child’s healthcare provider.

One thickener (a previous formulation of Simply Thick) has been associated with a severe digestive disorder called “necrotizing enterocolitis” in some premature and newborn infants. This thickener may also lead to greater digestive problems in children with certain health conditions. Many thickeners have warnings not to use their product in infants and children without consulting a healthcare provider. However, healthcare providers may recommend these products when they feel the benefits to your child’s health outweigh the risks.

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**To Learn More**
- Occupational & Physical Therapy
  206-987-2113
- Speech & Language Services
  206-987-2104
- Ask your child’s healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

**Free Interpreter Services**
- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
What else should I know about thickeners?

- You should be given a recipe for using the recommended thickener in the liquid your child will be drinking. A feeding therapist can help you with the recipe.
- You may be given a home test kit to measure the thickness of liquids (IDDSI kit).
- For infants fed by bottle, the nipple type or flow rate may need to be adjusted. A feeding therapist can help you choose the correct nipple.
- Not all thickeners can be used in breastmilk. Enzymes in the breastmilk keep some thickeners from working properly. We will help you choose the best option.
- Your child may need to be seen by a dietitian to make sure they get adequate nutrition and hydration while using thickener.
- Insurance may not pay for thickeners. If you receive food benefits or an EBT card, you can use them to purchase thickeners at available retail stores.

Comparison of thickeners used at Seattle Children’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients</th>
<th>Thick-it</th>
<th>Simply Thick Easy Mix</th>
<th>Gel Mix</th>
<th>Infant Cereal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modified food starch product</td>
<td>Xanthan gum and other gum-based thickeners</td>
<td>Carob bean gum</td>
<td>Rice or oat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do I get it?</td>
<td>Many stores and online</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Grocery stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional calories?</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Considerable. Can lead to excessive weight gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use in breastmilk?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digestive changes?</td>
<td>Tendency toward loose and more frequent stools</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td>Can cause constipation (less with oat cereal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>$$</td>
<td>$$$</td>
<td>$$$</td>
<td>$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of use</td>
<td>• Must wait after mixing. Gets thicker over time • Relatively smooth</td>
<td>• No waiting after mixing • Thickness does not change • Very smooth</td>
<td>• Must use warm liquid • Must wait after mixing • Gets thicker over time • Smooth • Cannot achieve a “honey” thick consistency</td>
<td>• May be lumpy or clog nipple • Gets thicker over time • Different brands need different recipes • Brown rice thickens poorly • Rice has potential for arsenic exposure in some brands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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