

Thickeners: Key Safety Messages

- There are many brands of thickener available; some are gum-based, and some are starch-based, and have different properties, such as palatability and stability. The instructions for use also varies between products. Different products are not equivalent and if the thickener is not used correctly, there is a risk of reduced efficiency of swallow function and the possibility of aspiration pneumonia.
- The recommendation to prescribe a thickener should come from an appropriately trained healthcare professional, e.g. a Speech & Language Therapist (SLT).
*The first-line thickener of choice requested by the SLT team in NORTH CUMBRIA SICBL is **Nutilus Clear**[®], which is a gum - based thickener.*
(The SLT team may, occasionally, advise an alternative product for specific patients.)
- Thickening products are not interchangeable and should not be switched without seeking advice from the SLT team. If a switch is agreed, prescribers must ensure that the patient (or their carer) is informed that a different product is being given and understands how to use the new product.
- Prescribers should take care that the correct product, as requested by SLT, is added to the clinical system, as some products have similar names e.g. Nutilus Clear and Nutilus Powder.
- In April 2021 an MHRA alert highlighted a risk of prescribing a starch-based thicker with polyethylene glycol laxatives; addition of a polyethylene glycol (PEG)-based laxative to a liquid that has been thickened with a starch-based thickener may counteract the thickening action, placing patients with dysphagia at a greater risk of aspiration.

PEG-based laxatives include Movicol, Macrogol 3350, Laxido and Moviprep.
Starch based thickeners include Nutilus Powder, Thick & Easy, Resource ThickenUp, Multi-thick, and others.

References and further reading:

PrescQipp. Care homes - Assisting people with swallowing difficulties B188. October 2017. Available at <https://www.prescqipp.info/umbraco/surface/authorisedmediasurface/index?url=%2fmedia%2f1192%2fb188-care-homes-assisting-people-with-swallowing-difficulties-20.pdf>

Drug Safety Update. April 2021. Polyethylene glycol (PEG) laxatives and starch-based thickeners: potential interactive effect when mixed, leading to an increased risk of aspiration. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/polyethylene-glycol-peg-laxatives-and-starch-based-thickeners-potential-interactive-effect-when-mixed-leading-to-an-increased-risk-of-aspiration#about-polyethylene-glycol-peg-laxatives>

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