Dementia is an umbrella term for a large group of conditions that cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. As part of this, people may lose the ability to swallow properly, a condition known as dysphagia. A person who cannot swallow effectively may accidentally take fluids into their airway and/or lungs, which can put them at risk of serious infections like pneumonia. All kinds of drinks can be thickened in order to make them easier and safer to swallow.

This review examined 15 papers (published from 1995 to 2008) on the effectiveness of thickened fluids for people with dementia living in residential care. Some papers were research studies, while others were opinion papers written by experts in the field. Overall, the level of evidence was low to moderate, which does not mean the findings are incorrect, only that more studies of a higher quality research design are still needed to support the findings.

We found sufficient evidence to suggest that it is probably safe and effective to use thickened fluids as a strategy for maintaining adequate fluid intake for people with dementia in residential aged care. We did not find any evidence to show that using most thickened fluids put people with dementia at any increased risk of illness or injury. There is, however, a small amount of evidence that shows that infant cereals should not be used to thicken fluids as this may decrease the amount of water and folate they are able to take in, which may worsen their condition.

We also found a small amount of evidence to show that thickened fluids might be more acceptable to older people (in the event that they develop dementia) than having a feeding tube inserted into their body. There is some strong evidence from other sources (beyond the scope of this review) to show that the use of feeding tubes is not effective for people with dementia as feeding tubes do not always prevent fluids getting into the lungs and may be pulled out by people who are confused and agitated.

Recording the person’s fluid intake to ensure that they are drinking enough and do not become dehydrated was also recommended by some studies. It may be difficult to get some residents with dementia to drink at all, and many will need assistance to manage cups or containers. Dehydration can cause the resident to become very ill, so maintaining an adequate intake of fluids, especially in hot or dry weather, is important. Facilities need to provide enough staff to ensure that residents can be assisted and encouraged to drink fluids.


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