

TEXTURE MODIFICATION



Many caregivers find that the person they are assisting is unwilling or unable to eat a healthy diet because of problems with chewing, swallowing, poorly fitting dentures, or other reasons. This video in the Home Alone AllianceSM series on special diets shows some ways to prepare foods that are soft and more easily eaten without being liquefied. Modifying the texture of foods is an important technique that can both improve the person's nutrition and fit in with the family's regular meals.

It's important to first identify the cause of the problem. Consult a health care provider, dentist, or speech therapist for an evaluation. An occupational therapist can recommend helpful eating utensils and devices. A dietitian can help you figure out which foods are best suited to the person's condition. Remember that texture is only one element of food's appeal; focus on taste, temperature, and smell as well.

Texture-Modified Diets

One common type of texture-modified diet is a *mechanical soft diet*. This is a regular diet with a few restrictions, such as avoiding tough meats, fresh fruits with membranes or tough skins, raw vegetables, and hard rolls.

A more restrictive diet is pureed, which includes foods that are like mashed potatoes in consistency. Just because the foods are pureed doesn't mean that they can't be tasty. Add seasonings as you would in a normal diet (remembering, of course, to limit salt and sugar). A blender or food processor can puree food easily.

Avoid dry, hard, or chewy foods. Even soups with pieces of meat or vegetables can be difficult to swallow. Many foods are naturally soft, and there are ways to make even normally chewy foods softer. For example, steam vegetables like broccoli or carrots instead of serving them crisp. Chop, mash, or puree foods to make them easier to swallow. Keep yogurt, applesauce, puddings, tofu, and other similar items on hand for nutritious snacks.

Hydration

It's important for the person to be well hydrated. This may be a challenge when it is difficult for the person to drink water, tea, or other thin liquids. Slightly thick liquids can be easier to control in the mouth and swallow without problems. Use fruit nectars, which are already thickened, instead of ordinary juices. Add natural thickeners such as applesauce or pureed fruit to juice. To thicken soups, add mashed potato flakes, infant cereals, or pureed vegetables. You can also try commercial thickeners; make sure you follow the directions to achieve the right thickness.

Setting aside the time and place for a pleasant and relaxed meal can encourage food intake. As part of this, the best position for proper swallowing is sitting upright at the table or in a comfortable chair, instead of lying in bed. Making just a few small changes in food choices or preparation can result in foods that are soft, moist, and easy to chew, and in liquids that are satisfying and easier to drink. Modifying food textures makes mealtime less stressful and more enjoyable.

Additional Resources

The Muscular Dystrophy Association has recipes and tips to make swallowing easier at https://www.mda.org/sites/default/files/publications/Meals_Easy_Swallowing_P-508.pdf.

Vanderbilt University has information on texture-modified diets at <https://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/documents/cqa/files/Modified%20Diets%20Handouts.pdf>.

Alberta Health Services has guides on preparing texture-modified foods for supportive living sites available at <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/nutrition/if-nfs-slides-preparing-texture-modified-foods-a-training-program-for-supportive-living-sites.pdf>. These can be useful for home meals as well.

The Winnipeg Regional Health Authority has advice and simple recipes to thicken fluids at http://www.wrha.mb.ca/extranet/nutrition/files/ClientEd_Texture_ThickFluids%20-%20Disclaimer.pdf.

Swallowing problems are addressed in a guide from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, available at <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/swallowing/SwallowingAdults.htm>.

Because a choking or swallowing incident can be dangerous, it is important to ask a health care provider what to do if this happens, and to have access to a phone to call 911 if needed. Take some time to review this advice from the American College of Emergency Physicians: <http://www.emergencycareforyou.org/emergency-101/choking-heimlich-maneuver/#sm.0000jdj5r113xeey1ptvpse8hjb2j>.

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