

Dysphagia: A Practical Approach to Nutritional Care

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“Yuck!” “Baby food!” “No way would I eat that!”

Many of these phrases have been used to describe the pureed diet. These comments make us realize that we need to be more aware of how we present and prepare food for our patients with dysphagia. If the food doesn't look good, they won't want to try it. If the food doesn't taste good, they won't want to eat it—and these residents are already at risk for malnutrition and dehydration. It is our job to assure that they receive adequate calories, protein and fluids to maintain health.

Dysphagia diets are generally prescribed according to consistency; mechanical soft or pureed are the most common types of dysphagia diets. Mechanical soft diets consist of ground meats, soft fruits and vegetables that can be mashed with a fork, extra gravies and sauces to moisten foods and make them easier to swallow. If a resident can handle a mechanical soft diet, it is preferable to a pureed diet, simply because the goal is to keep the resident at the most normal consistency possible.

The pureed diet is used as an alternative for those dysphagia residents who cannot tolerate regular or mechanical soft foods. The pureed diet is generally a cohesive, mashed potato or pudding-like

consistency. Food is pureed in a food processor to achieve a consistent smooth and easy to swallow product. This diet poses a real challenge to our creativity as foodservice professionals.

In years past, many facilities served pureed foods in bowls—the “three bowl syndrome.” Generally all residents on pureed diets received three bowls of pureed food per meal: meat, potato and vegetable. It became very easy for staff to fall into the habit of providing pureed food this way, but it was not a very pleasant presentation for the residents who received it.

Today we are past the “three bowl syndrome” and have moved on the creative challenge of making pureed food appear and taste more like “real food.” The goal is for the pureed diet to look and taste as close to regular as possible, while easing the chewing and swallowing process.

Standardized pureed recipes are step number one—to assure a product that is consistent in taste, appearance and nutrient content. Pureed souffles, gelled bread/dessert products and layered products all enhance the appearance of the diet. It doesn't have to be difficult—there are simple things that can be done to make food look more appealing:

- using a spatula to flatten a scoop of pureed meat to make it look like a patty;
- utilizing smaller scoops to make meat look like meatballs;
- using sauces and gravies over meats and vegetables to garnish;
- sprinkling fruits or desserts with colored gelatin powder to add color;
- layering gelled bread with pureed meat to create the appearance of a sandwich;
- layering pureed pasta with pureed meat and sauce to create the appearance of lasagna or spaghetti; or
- using pastry bags to create special effects such as mixing two different colored vegetables (peas and carrots for example) and piping them onto the plate to create vegetables with flair.

There are also many products available to enhance the ease of preparation and to allow us to be more creative in how we present pureed foods. Various modified food starches and enhancers are available that allow us to form foods that look more like their regular counterparts. Food molds that are shaped like various meats or vegetable can be used to enhance appearance. Some manufacturers have developed ready-to serve foods for the pureed diet.

The following is a partial listing of manufacturers and recipe sources to assist you in achieving the goal of appetizing and appealing pureed foods for your residents:

- American Institutional Products (800) 866-7757—Pureed, shaped entrees (meats, hot dogs), bulk fruits and vegetables, molds, single-serve gelled pastries (cookies, waffles, doughnuts, etc.); thickened juice, drinks, milk; thickening powders.
- Cliffdale Farms (800-877-1553)—Pureed meats, vegetables, fruits, desserts.
- Diamond Crystal (800) 225-0592—Pre-shaped pureed foods (meats, casseroles, entrees); Puree Plus (for thickening meats, vegetables, desserts); thickened juices, milk, juice drinks.
- Menu Direct Corp. (888) menu123—Pureed meals for home delivery.
- Novartis (800) 622-2689—Thicken Up (fluid and food thickener); Puree Appeal (food enhancer—adds calories, protein, improves appearance and flavor); thickened juice, milk, drinks, milkshakes, sugar-free drinks, coffee; gelled cookies.
- NutraBalance (800) 432-3134—thickened water, milkshakes, juices.
- Travis Meats, Inc. (800) 247-7606—Prepared pureed meat products.
- Becky Dorner & Associates (330) 666-2388—*Puree Pizzazz Cookbook* by Becky Dorner, RD, LD and Jan Buchheim, MS, RD, LD, *Scoop It, Mold It, Pipe It* and *The Dysphagia Challenge* by Pam Womack, RD.