

How did you find the Puree Challenge?

Amy: Harder than I expected, I knew I would miss the food, but didn't actually realise how much I would struggle to drink thickened drinks. I also didn't expect to feel as tired and malnourished as I did. By the end of day two I had completely lost my appetite and had to force myself to eat. By the end of the week, half of the time I did not even bother which was not good at all, especially when you have a dissertation to write.

Helen: It was tough! I knew it would be hard because I have a real issue with textures (porridge, mousse etc.) but I had thought drinking thickened fluids would not be a problem. How naïve! I found that my energy levels dropped dramatically during the week, to the point where I slept through a dissertation meeting, oops! My dissertation supervisor blamed it on "puree brain"!

What was the hardest thing about the Puree Challenge?

Helen: I was surprised to find that actually hydration was the hardest part. Whilst I am very grateful to Thick and Easy for supplying us with thickener for the Puree Challenge I would be happy to never see it again! I carried around a bottle of thickened squash with me at all times to prompt myself to drink and I would struggle to finish the bottle (which was about 500ml). I tried to up my hydration with soups and smoothies but I was still dehydrated. During the week I had multiple headaches which I'm pretty sure was a result of not drinking enough.

Amy: Same as Helen, thickened drinks! I found it so difficult to drink them. In the end I gave up and admitted defeat. On average I had about 100mls of fluid a day, even though there was no limit on the amount we could drink. That was really bad when you should drink at least 2 litres of water a day.

How did you find the food preparation side of the Puree Challenge?

Helen: I found that I spent a lot of the week planning and preparing my meals. I found the puree challenge increased the amount of fruit and vegetables in my diet. Breakfasts were smoothies, with oats in for energy, I did learn on Day 1 that normal oats were too lumpy even once blended but Ready Brek worked quite nicely! Making soups was easy, great for using up leftovers and felt relatively "normal". It did feel a bit out of season to be eating a thick vegetable soup with the sun shining! For dinners I tried to make things I would eat anyway, the blending process meant everything was different temperatures. Thank goodness for the microwave! It also helped that Amy and I prepared a few meals together and it made the process easier (it also meant a night off from all of the washing up!).

Amy: Very time consuming. It created so much washing up. I also struggled to keep all of my foods the same temperature, so relied on the microwave to warm things up once everything was prepared. Towards the end of the challenge I ended up choosing foods to eat that required less preparation i.e. soup and mash potato.

What did pureed food taste like?

Amy: Like someone had already chewed it for you, very strange. By the end of the week my mouth just wanted to chew.

Helen: It tasted the same! Pureed food really impacted the experience of eating, the appearance put you off before you had even tried it and the texture, I'd have to agree with Amy, it was like someone else had chewed it for you!

What was the best pureed food you tasted during the week?

Amy: Sausages, cheesy mash and baked beans; that was the one meal I actually enjoyed.

Helen: The same as Amy! The sausages were a bit odd (I did attempt to shape them back into sausage shapes) but the cheesy mash and beans were SO good, I think because they were closest to the textures my brain was expecting to experience.

What was the food you eat most during the week?

Helen: Well I had a smoothie for breakfast and soup for lunch every day of the Puree Challenge but pick-me-up during the week were Cadbury's Pots of Joy; it was essentially melted white chocolate buttons.

Amy: A tie between soup and yogurt. However, I was extremely bored by the end of the week.

What thing did you miss most during the week?

Helen: WATER, I normally drink pints and pints of squash but the thickened squash had put me off squash for a while after the challenge!

Amy: A proper cup of tea. I managed 3 all week. I normally have 5 a day minimum!

Helen: We had a stand at UEA on Day 5 with thickened squash for students and lecturers to try, there were some very interesting reactions to the drink; it got compared to unset jelly by one student! The looks of horror when they realised we had been on thickened drinks for 5 days were something else! Needless to say, we got a few sympathy donations!

What have you learnt about modified diets and dysphagia?

Amy: That you have to plan everything related to eating and drinking in advance, you can't just pop to the shop for some lunch and pick up a sandwich or salad or bottle of water. There is also nothing worse than watching everyone else eating things you cannot have i.e. chocolate brownie and crisps. You also have to be very proficient at using a blender. FYI I'm not! There were several times during the week where I nearly took my own eye out... a serious health and safety hazard!

Helen: I massively unappreciated the amount of planning that goes into a puree diet from food shopping to preparing meals. I went on a course during the week and took a packed lunch (soup); I spent the car journey wondering if I would be able to heat it up or if I'd have to eat it cold. Luckily the venue had a microwave (I assume for

mothers with infants), I was so relieved! I had not wanted to inconvenience others because of my diet and this really made me aware of the difficulties of planning outings for those with dysphagia. On the Day 5 I went to the pub to celebrate the Puree Challenge nearly being over and thickened my cider using a SloCider sample sent over by Slo Drinks. I got some very funny looks in the pub. I suppose it did look a bit odd; pouring white powder into my cider and watching it froth up like a science experiment (I'd recommend reading the instructions, I didn't and mess ensued)! I knew that a modified diet would impact my social life to some extent but I had not expected to feel so self-conscious and my friends were so apologetic and guilty about eating/drinking or even discussing food/drink in front of me.

What was the first thing you had after the challenge was over?

Helen: I stayed up until midnight on Day 5; I drank 2 pints of water in quick succession!

Amy: Full English breakfast - gluten free ☺ and a cup of tea

Any final thoughts?

Amy: I'm proud of all of the money we have raised for a fantastic cause and really hope that sufferers of MND benefit from our fundraising. On behalf of the MND association and myself, thank you for all of your support and donations. It made a very difficult and challenging week worthwhile. I also want to thank Helen for pulling me through, I could have never have done this on my own! We only had to do this for one week, for some people, puree food and thickened diets are their lives. I will definitely be thinking about the impact modified foods have on people's lives if I ever have to prescribe a dysphagia diet.

Helen: I'd like to thank the Speech and Language Therapy team at the James Paget University Hospital, I had my final year placement with them earlier this year and was inspired after hearing a couple of the SLTs talking about "puree week", which they have done more than once(!) to gain insight into how modified diets are for their patients. Fresh from placement I was chatting to Amy and suggested we give it a go; we had NO idea what we were letting ourselves into! I have to agree with Amy that donations throughout the week really kept us motivated (thank you so much)! What is fantastic is that lots of the donations have come from those who previously had no knowledge about dysphagia, how it relates to progressive neurological diseases, such as MND, and the role of Speech and Language Therapists with this client group. We have also had an amazing response on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/PureeChallenge>) from the SLT and MNDA community.

The Puree Challenge has enabled us to support the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapist's (RCSLT) campaign to raise awareness for SLT – "Giving Voice", we have had a first-hand experience of a modified diet and we've raised over £500 for the MNDA!