

Royal Icing with Consistency Adjustments

Royal Icing is hands-down my favorite icing for cookie decorating. The egg whites in Royal Icing make it faster drying than confectioner's icing, where the liquid content is usually milk or cream, and better for fine detail work, as it's less prone to spreading. Use this thick formulation as edible glue for adhering sugar dragées and fondant appliqué to cookie tops, or for piecing together large gingerbread structures. For outlining, topcoating, marbling, and other cookie decorating techniques, just thin with water until the desired consistency is reached. See Consistency Adjustments, right.

Yield: About 4 1/2 cups, enough to topcoat 4 to 5 dozen (3-inch) cookies

Prep Talk: Tinted icing is best used the day it's mixed. (The color will dry more uniformly, without bleeding or blotching, this way.) Otherwise, the icing can be made 1 to 2 days ahead and stored in the fridge. Bring the icing to room temperature when ready to use and stir well to restore its original consistency. Once applied to cookies, the icing should remain at room temperature so it sets into a crunchy candy-like coating. *Important:* Unless you're using the icing, always cover the surface flush with plastic wrap to prevent a crust from forming.

Ingredients:

- 2 pounds powdered sugar (*Note:* Use 10X, not 6X or less finely processed, powdered sugar. Your sugar should feel like soft talcum powder, and not at all gritty, or you may have trouble with it later plugging parchment cones or pastry bags. I typically use C&H brand, though most US brands are of the 10X-variety.)
- 1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar
- 5 large egg whites (or about 11 tablespoons or 5 1/2 ounces pasteurized whites*)
- Flavoring, to taste
- Liqua-gel food coloring of your choice, to desired shade

* To guard against salmonella poisoning associated with raw eggs, it's best to use pasteurized whites (or hydrated meringue or albumen powder) especially when serving the very young or old, or those with compromised immune systems. Pasteurized whites are found in cartons, or pasteurized in the shell, in the refrigerated section of most grocery stores. If using pasteurized eggs in the shell, you may find the eggs harder to separate than normal, so you may need to use an additional egg white. If using meringue powder, use 2 teaspoons meringue powder hydrated in 2 tablespoons warm water for each large egg white called for in this recipe. Be sure to hydrate with warm water to completely dissolve the powder; otherwise, your icing may end up gritty.

Method:

1 | Mix the powdered sugar and cream of tartar together in the bowl of an electric mixer. Stir in the egg whites by hand to moisten the sugar. Fit the electric mixer with a whip attachment and beat the mixture on low speed to evenly distribute the egg whites. Turn the mixer to medium-high speed and continue to beat about 1 to 2 minutes, just until the icing is silky and very white. (The icing will lighten and thicken as you beat it.)

Take care not to beat the icing any longer than is needed to turn it crisp white, and to only beat it at high speed at this very thick consistency. Extended beating, especially of looser icing, can pump a lot of air into it, creating tiny (or not so tiny) bubbles that can be a pain to eradicate once incorporated.

2 | Beat in flavoring and/or coloring, as desired. Again, take care not to overbeat for the reasons noted in Step 1.

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Outlining and Topcoating with Royal Icing
Photo by Steve Adams

Consistency Adjustments: The following consistency adjustments are *approximate guidelines for 1 cup of thick, un-tinted Royal Icing*. The addition of food coloring or flavoring, beating time, and normal variations in egg size can all affect the end-consistency of your icing.

If after making these adjustments, you think your icing is too thin or too thick for your application, don't worry. The icing consistency can be adjusted at any stage of the decorating process simply by stirring in sifted powdered sugar to thicken, or water to thin. Remember, at this stage, it is important to gently stir in (not whip on the mixer) any additional water. As the icing loosens, you're much more likely to kick air bubbles into it even with aggressive stirring.

For outlining: Add 1/2 to 3/4 teaspoon water. For crisp, well-defined outlines, start with 1/2 teaspoon water. If the icing is too thick to easily pipe through a small (1/8-inch) hole in [aparchment pastry cone](#), gradually add more water. When piped, the icing should hold a thin line with no - or minimal - spreading.

For topcoating: To avoid icing run-off on cookies under 2 inches, start by adding 1 1/2 teaspoons water. Gradually increase to 2 to 2 1/2 teaspoons, as needed, to improve spread-ability on larger cookies.

For marbling: A consistency thicker than topcoating consistency (i.e., about 3/4 to 1 1/3 teaspoons water per cup of thick icing) usually works best, as long as all of the icings you're using still marble fluidly without the appearance of "tracks." The smoothest, sharpest marbling effect is also achieved when all icings are as close to the same consistency as possible. (*Note:* The prettiest marbling patterns, in my humble opinion, require 3 or more icing colors. For *Marbling Technique Tips*, see the link below.)

For stenciling: Generally, 1/2 to 1 1/2 teaspoons water works best, though the exact quantity will vary with egg size and the other factors noted above. The icing must be thin enough to easily spread into the stencil openings without leaving peaks or tracks when the spatula is lifted. At the same time, it must be sufficiently thick to keep from creeping under the stencil into areas where it is not wanted. It is better to err on the thicker side, especially with very fine and closely spaced stencil openings. For *Stenciling Technique Tips*, see the link below.

For beadwork: About 2 to 3 teaspoons water works best, though, again, exact quantities will vary. At the proper consistency, a smooth, well-rounded dot should form when the icing is piped through a small (1/8-inch or less) opening in a parchment pastry cone. If the icing forms a peak, it is too thick. Conversely, if it spreads a great deal, it is too loose.