

Choking and Suffocation

Children and Choking

In 2005, 53 children aged 0 to 4 years and 38 children aged 5 to 15 years presented at Princess Margaret Hospital ED as a result of a choking episode.

Choking most commonly occurs because of food blocking the airway. However, people and in particular children also choke on a variety of other objects.

Food is the most common cause of choking for all age groups. Amongst children it is the cause of two-thirds of choking cases.

Boys are most at risk: two thirds of those who choke on non-food items are boys. It appears there is an equal risk that boys and girls will choke on food.

Choking on Food

Children under five and people aged over 65 have the highest death rate due to choking on food. Under five-year olds represent two thirds of all children under 15 who die from choking. And for each of these, about 25 children under five are also admitted to hospital because of food aspiration.

Foods that typically create a problem are hard foods, those that require a reasonable amount of chewing and small solid foods. The foods most commonly involved in choking are:

- Raw carrot
- Celery and other raw vegetable pieces
- Pieces of raw apple
- Nuts, especially peanuts, walnuts and almonds
- Chicken and fish bones

Other foods associated with choking include:

- Sausages
- Sweets
- Popcorn
- Grapes
- Corn chips

A recent South Australian report showed that children under four are particularly at risk because they can bite food better than they can chew. They bite food with their incisor teeth. But their back teeth, which are used for chewing and grinding food, are not developed enough to chew and grind food well.

There is a conflict between advocating for children to eat raw, natural and often more healthy foods and the ability of children to chew these foods.

Children are more likely to choke if they are moving whilst they are eating, especially if they are running or playing. An unsupervised child has more chance of choking than a supervised child.

One solution is the suitable preparation of food for young children, for example:

- Grating
- Mashing
- Removal of skin
- Chopping into very small pieces

Prevention

- Do not give foods that can break into hard pieces
- Avoid giving hard food to young children. Raw carrot, celery sticks and apples should be chopped into small pieces and tough skins removed
- Supervise young children while they are eating
- Make sure young children sit quietly while eating
- Children who are upset should not be made to eat – they are more at risk of choking

Choking on Non-Food Items

- Nearly all children who choke on non-food items are under five years of age. Young children place just about all objects in their mouths as a means of exploring the world around them.
- Generally, any object that fits inside a 35mm film canister can be a choking hazard. Particularly hazardous objects include:
 - Buttons
 - Batteries
 - Coins
 - Toys that contain small parts
 - Pieces that can break off toys
- Keep older children's toys away from young children. This may mean separate play areas for children of different ages.
- If children are under three, they should have toys labeled 'suitable for children under three'. These labels are not a sign of intelligence, they are there to indicate the age appropriateness of the product.
- Pen tops have been associated with a number of choking deaths. Some manufacturers are now making pens that include breathing holes on the pen top. Marking pens can also cause problems. Some leading suppliers also produce marking pens with safety tops.

Prevention

- Supervision of young children is essential during the stage they test everything by placing it into their mouth.
- Check children's play and access areas regularly for small, potential choking objects.
- Buy toys that are suitable for the age group. Toys that can break easily and have parts that can come loose should be avoided.
- Check and maintain children's toys regularly.

What to do if a Child is choking

- Check first to see if the child is able to cough, cry and breathe.
- If the child is breathing, they may be able to dislodge the food by coughing. Do not hit the child on the back because this can dislodge food to a more dangerous position. Stay with the child. If the child's breathing has not improved within a few minutes, telephone 000 for an ambulance.
- If the child is not breathing, place the child face down over your lap so that the child's head is lower than the child's chest and give four sharp blows on the back between the shoulder blades. This should dislodge the food. If the child is still not breathing, call 000 for an ambulance service operator. The ambulance service operator will tell you what to do next.

Choking Cases: Children under Five

- Eating apple in home bedroom, choked
- Rolling on bed, inhaled plastic pen top, went into lung
- Given a chocolate-coated peanut, inhaled it
- Eating apple in kitchen laughing, aspirated apple
- Tidying up crayons with mother, ate crayon, inhaled a piece
- Eating popcorn and sultanas in kitchen, stood up, knocked by sister, gagged and coughed
- Playing with toys, swallowed broken plastic sock hook
- Boy inhaled peanut given by sister in restaurant
- Playing, swallowed metal bolt. Was removed by ambulance officers
- Eating peanuts. Choking episode. Mum cleared the peanuts, but child got second degree pneumonia
- Watching TV in lounge room, put coins in mouth.

Suffocation

Plastics

Are some plastics more dangerous than others?

- Thin plastic bags, plastic wrap and dry cleaning bags are particularly dangerous. A child can suffocate if they pull them over their heads. Always tie a knot in them before throwing them out. Plastic bags should be stored out of reach.
- Plastic covers on cot and bassinet mattresses should be removed before use. These are not a substitute for a heavy-duty thick waterproof sheet.
- Do not give balloons, particularly un-inflated balloons to young children. Older children should be told of the danger of making 'balloons' by sucking on plastic film or broken balloon pieces. The plastic can be inhaled and block the child's airway. The strings on balloons can also be dangerous. Foil balloons on a stick are safer, or tie balloons up high where children cannot reach them.

Are pillows dangerous?

- Pillows and bumper pads are unnecessary for children under the age of two.
- If a baby has a tendency to spit up milk after a feed, the head of the mattress may be raised by placing a towel or a pillow under the mattress.

Mattresses

- Choosing a firm mattress is most important to prevent accidental suffocation or SIDS.
- Babies and young children have sometimes suffocated when they have been lying down on soft surfaces such as bean bags, water beds etc.
- Putting a baby to sleep on its back or side is most important. For further information contact SIDS and KIDS on 9474 3544.

Clothing

- Avoid ties or ribbons on baby's clothing and loose crocheted jackets that may pull tight.
- Always remove a baby's bib before putting him/her down to sleep. Avoid necklaces and other jewellery that can get caught.
- Be aware of cords and strings on clothing, e.g. parkas and hooded windcheaters that can catch on play equipment.

Disused Refrigerators or Toy Boxes

- Remove the door of a refrigerator that is no longer in use or before dumping.
- Ensure that attractive hiding places are no longer accessible or provide adequate ventilation holes in items such as toy boxes.
- Children can fall asleep in favourite hiding spots.
- Make sure that toy hinges will not allow a child's head to become trapped by a heavy lid.
- A removable lid is safer.

First Aid for Suffocation

Anyone who has the care of young children should take a first aid course in paediatric first aid and resuscitation.

Courses are conducted by:

- St John Ambulance Association
- Australian Red Cross
- Royal Life Saving Society

Local branches of these operations are listed in the white pages of your telephone directory.

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For more information ☎ (08) 9340 8509

Child Safety Information Line ☎ 1800 802 244

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