

fact sheet

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

Children and Choking

During the two and a half year period from 2002-mid 2004, 3 children aged five years or under, died as a result of choking in South Australia. In addition, 132 children under fifteen years were admitted to hospital as a result of aspiration of food and other objects. Of the 132 children admitted, 105 of these were under the age of five years.

Food is the most common cause of choking for all age groups. Amongst children, it is the cause of two-thirds of choking cases. One third of children die, however, through choking on non-food items.

For every child under 5 who dies from choking, another 25 children will be admitted to hospital for near choking or food aspiration.

Boys are most at risk. It appears that there is an equal risk that a boy or girl will choke on food. However, two-thirds of those who choke on non-food items are boys.

Why young children are at risk of choking on food.

Young people do not have the back teeth needed to chew and grind lumps of food properly. These teeth may not be fully developed until around 4 years of age. Young children are still learning to eat solid food. Food swallowed in large pieces is more likely to get stuck and block off the airways. If it goes "down the wrong way" this can cause young children to choke.

If young children run, play, laugh or cry while eating, they are more likely to choke on their food

Choking on food

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 and corn chips.

At eating times always stay with young children and supervise them while eating. Make sure that young children sit quietly while eating and never force young children to eat, as this may cause them to choke.

How to make eating safer for young children

There is a conflict between the advocacy for children to eat raw, natural and often more healthy foods, and their ability to chew these foods well. One way around the problem is the suitable preparation of food for young children, for example:

- Do not give foods that can break off into hard pieces

- Avoid raw carrot, celery sticks and apple pieces, for example. These foods should be grated, cooked or mashed
- Sausages, frankfurts and other meats should be cut into small pieces. Tough skins on frankfurts and other sausages should be removed.
- Do not give popcorn, nuts, hard lollies, cornchips or other similar foods to young children.

Choking on non-food items

Nearly all children who choke on non-food item 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. As a rule of thumb, any object smaller than a table tennis ball can be a choking hazard. Particularly hazardous objects include:

- Buttons
- Batteries
- Coins
- Toys that contain small parts
- Pieces that can break off toys



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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 safety of the product.

Pen tops have been associated with a number of choking deaths. Some manufacturers are now making pens that include breathing holes in the pen top. Marking pens can also cause problems. Some leading suppliers also produce marker pens with safety tops.



Prevention

Supervision of young children is essential during the period when they test everything by placing it into their mouths.

Check children's play and access area 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 young child is choking

Check first if the child is still able to breathe, cough or cry.

If the child IS breathing, coughing or crying, the child may be able to dislodge the food by coughing.

Do not try to dislodge the food by hitting the child on the back because this may move the food into a more dangerous position and make the child stop breathing.

Stay with the child and watch to see if their breathing improves. If the child is not breathing easily within a few minutes, phone 000 for an ambulance.

If the child is not breathing

Try to dislodge the piece of food by placing the child face down across your knees so that their head is lower than their chest.

Give up to 4 sharp blows on the back just between the shoulder blades. This should provide enough force to dislodge the food.



Choking

Check again for signs of breathing

If the child is still not breathing, it may be necessary to perform lateral chest thrusts. Give lateral chest thrusts by placing one hand on either side of the infant's chest below the armpits. Give up to 4 quick, squeezing thrusts on both sides simultaneously.



If the child is still not breathing, urgently call 000 and ask for an ambulance. The ambulance service operator will be able to tell you what to do next.

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