

Health and Safety Awareness

Preventing Suffocation



Suffocation, also known as asphyxiation, is a condition of being deprived of oxygen by having breathing stopped. It is often a silent killer. Staff and family members can proactively identify risks for suffocation and take preventative measures to mitigate those risks.

Types of suffocation incidents can include becoming entangled in bed sheets, pillows, safety belts or harnesses which cut off oxygen; falling between a bed and a wall; or the blockage of an airway with large, inedible items.

In addition to identifying suffocation hazards, staff and family members can also identify individuals who are at an increased risk for choking. There are several factors which increase a person's risk for choking some of these factors include:

- Neurological and muscular disorders such as cerebral palsy or seizure disorders
- Dysphagia (difficulty swallowing)
- Side effects from medications
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)
- Incorrect diet texture
- Few or no teeth
- Dentures
- Swallowing non-edible objects (Pica)
- Food stealing - resulting in obtaining non-prescribed/inappropriate diet, eating too quickly, or cramming food in the mouth

Safety Tips for Prevention

To maintain a safe environment for individuals at risk for suffocation, staff should perform frequent checks of the individual's home environment. Additionally, ensure that all staff who care for the individual are aware of specific supports that may be required to maintain safety. More safety tips include:

- Addressing environmental factors which pose a risk for example: spacing between a bed and a wall; cords for window blinds
- Never leave a person unattended when using safety harnesses, slings, or belts which could place an individual at risk.
- Ensure that staff are trained to properly position harnesses, slings, and belts.
- If an individual poses a risk for Pica, follow all protocols for environmental safety hazards.
- Use mealtime protocols for individuals with aspiration risks
- Follow all doctor's orders for proper seating, equipment use, and mealtimes.
- Request a swallow study if the individual has:
 - Experienced a choking incident
 - Appears to have difficulty swallowing
 - Coughs frequently when feeding or drinking
 - Has had a previous case of aspiration pneumonia

Resources:

Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (2018). Health trends. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/qwy49992/Downloads/june-2018-newsletter-final.pdf

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Samuels, R., & Chadwick, D.D. (2006). Predictors of asphyxiation risk in adults with intellectual disabilities and dysphagia. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 50(5), 362-370.

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