

**Office of Integrated Health  
Health & Safety Information**

Dr. Dawn M. Adams DNP, ANP-BC, CHC  
Director, Office of Integrated

# Choking

Choking (object in the airway) it can be a partial or complete obstruction of the airway can be due to a foreign body (e.g. food, a bead, toy, etc.). Choking can be either from food stuffing behaviors or from dysphagia. Individuals who have been on long term psychotropic medications and suffer from Tardive Diskinesthia are high risk for choking, and the risk is higher if accompanied by abnormal eating behaviors.

According to *Injury Facts 2017*, choking is the fourth leading cause of unintentional injury death. Of the 5,051 people who died from choking in 2015.

**This is serious and can be fatal!**

## Factors that Increase the Risk of Choking

Individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities have a number of factors that increase the risk of choking that include but are not limited to:

- Neurological and muscular disorders such as cerebral palsy and seizure disorders
- Dysphagia (difficulty swallowing)
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)
- Difficulty swallowing
- Few or no teeth
- Dentures
- Placing too much food or medication in one's mouth
- Not chewing food well enough prior to swallowing
- Putting too large a portion in one's mouth
- Eating or drinking too fast
- Inattention to eating
- Poor posture while eating
- Swallowing non-edible objects (Pica)
- Food stealing - resulting in obtaining non-prescribed/inappropriate diet, eating quickly, etc.
- Incorrect diet texture - liquids or food items not prepared in accordance with prescribed diet
- Eating something with two or more diet textures, especially anything with a thin liquid and a solid component such as cereal and milk
- Side effects from medications such as dysphagia as a side effect

## Medications that can increase risk of choking

- Those that affect the smooth and striated muscles of the esophagus that are involved in swallowing may cause dysphagia such as, but not limited to Cogentin.
- Those that cause dry mouth (xerostomia) may interfere with swallowing by impairing the person's ability to move food such as, but not limited to Benadryl
- Local anesthetics such as Novocain which is often used for dental work may temporarily cause a loss of sensation that may affect swallowing before it wears off.
- Antipsychotic/ Neuroleptic medications given for treatment of psychiatric disorders may affect swallowing as many of them produce dry mouth and some of them can cause movement disorders that impact the muscles of the face and tongue which are involved in swallowing such as, but not limited to Risperdal.
- Those that depress the Central Nervous System (CNS) can decrease awareness and voluntary muscle control that may affect swallowing such as, but not limited to Tegretol.
- Those remain in the esophagus too long, potentially causing damage and affecting swallowing such as, but not limited to Tetracycline.
- Other medications such as high dose steroids and chemotherapeutic (anti-cancer) preparations may cause muscle wasting or damage to the esophagus and may suppress the immune system making the person susceptible to infection.

## Common Foods Identified as "High Risk" for Choking

- Hotdogs served whole
- Chicken on the bone
- Grapes
- Peanut butter
- Peanut butter sandwiches on soft bread
- Thick chewy bread, e.g. white bread, bagels, pizza, etc.
- Marshmallows
- Dry, crumbly foods such as cornbread or rice served without butter, jelly, sauce, etc.
- Dry meats such as ground beef served without sauce, gravy
- Whole, raw vegetables served in large bite-sized pieces
- Whole hard fruits like apples or pears
- Candy with large nuts
- Hard nuts

## Preventing Choking

Because of the risk factors associated with choking, it is critical that care givers ensure adequate supervision of persons served, and are trained and familiar with individuals':

- Prescribed diets
- Meal time or Pica precautions
- History of previous choking incidents or difficulty swallowing
- Properly assisted eating techniques
- Positioning during and after meal time
- Required supervision during meals

## 1. Emergency Response to Choking

1. **Immediately call 911.** If another person is present instruct them to call 911.
2. Follow your agency's training for responding to a choking victim.
3. If trained, immediately provide repeated abdominal thrusts, known to some as the Heimlich maneuver, until the object causing the choking is dislodged and the individual can cough forcefully, speak or breathe, or until the individual becomes unconscious.
4. If the individual is unconscious, remove any visible obstructions from the mouth and begin administering CPR. Check periodically to see if the obstruction becomes dislodged.

### Important Safety Tips

- Some people may feel embarrassment when they choke and move away from others. This places them at increased risk because they are less likely to be near people who can help. When food is served, be alert for those who leave without warning and check on them to ensure they are not in need of assistance.
- It is recommended that agencies use regular drills or mock emergencies in order to ensure that when staff recognizes choking they can respond quickly and appropriately to the incident.
- Having all staff trained in CPR and First Aid represents best practice.

### Resources

- ✚ American Red Cross (2011). Adult first aid/CPR/AED: Ready reference. Retrieved from [https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF\\_s/Health\\_Safety\\_Services/Trainin\\_g/Adult\\_ready\\_reference.pdf](https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF_s/Health_Safety_Services/Trainin_g/Adult_ready_reference.pdf)
- ✚ Balzer, K. M. (2000). Drug-induced dysphagia. *International Journal of MS Care*, 2(1), 40-50. Retrieved from <http://ijmsc.org/doi/abs/10.7224/1537-2073-2.1.40?code=cmssc-site>
- ✚ Carl, L. L., & Johnson, P. R. (2006). *Drugs and dysphagia: How medications can affect eating and swallowing*. Austin, Tex: Pro-Ed.
- ✚ Lumsden, A. J. & Cooper, J. G. (2017). The choking hazard of grapes: a plea for awareness. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 102, p. 473-474. Retrieved from <https://adc.bmj.com/content/archdischild/102/5/473.full.pdf>
- ✚ National Safety Council (2018). Choking prevention and rescue tips: Thousands of people die from choking every year. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsc.org/home-safety/safety-topics/choking-suffocation>
- ✚ National Safety Council (2017). National Safety Council: Injury facts, 2017 edition. Retrieved from <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/20020222#/20020222/1>
- ✚ U.S. National Library of Medicine, Medline Plus (2018, Aug). Choking - adult or child over 1 year. Retrieved from <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000049.htm>.

