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Choking and Kids: Prevention Is The Key

The facts are sobering. Choking is the leading cause of accidental death among children under one year of age. But it's not just infants who are at risk. Over 2,800 people die each year from choking. Of these, the vast majority are children aged 4 or younger.

Kids will put just about anything in their mouths—and quickly—often without anyone even noticing. Young children are especially vulnerable to choking because they have small airways. An object or a piece of food can become lodged in the airway itself or can compress the airway, leading to choking. Prevention is clearly the best strategy.

Keeping Mealtime Safe

Minimize the risk of choking with:

- proper food selection
 - proper food preparation
 - proper serving practices
- *Choose foods appropriate for your child's age*

As a child ages and gets more teeth, he or she can handle larger pieces of foods, but avoid seeds, fruit skins, and very sticky foods. Meat is often difficult for children to chew properly. Always cut meat into small pieces or slice it thinly and then cut it up. Children don't learn to chew with a grinding motion until about age 4. Until then, certain foods will present more of a risk and should be avoided, including raw carrot pieces or circles, hot dog chunks, grapes, nuts, and popcorn.

Because young children have difficulty inhibiting the reflex to swallow, hard candies and gum are risky. Avoid anything that has to be sucked on without swallowing.

- *Supervise your child during mealtimes*

Children need to be watched and assisted *at all times* when they're eating. A child whose airway becomes obstructed with a piece of food often isn't able to cry or call out for help, so keep your child in sight the entire time.

- *Teach children proper eating behavior*

When it comes to choking, *how* a child is eating is as important as *what* is eaten. A child who is eating while lying on the couch or who crams giant bites of food into his mouth is at risk for choking. For safety teach your child to:

- sit up straight
- eat at a table
- take small bites
- chew thoroughly
- avoid rushing while eating

In addition, young children should never be allowed to run or walk when eating.

Keeping the House Safe

Keep clutter off the floor

Everything on the floor is fair game for a child's mouth! Keeping floors as clean as possible is a priority. This doesn't necessarily mean mopping every day, but it does mean keeping the floor swept clean of old food bits, small objects, dirt and debris, small toys, and toy pieces. Older children in the house should be taught that they may play with toys with small parts only on a table that is out of a younger child's reach.

“Childproof” reachable surfaces

As silly as it sounds, a good way to see what your child can reach is to get down to your child’s level to get a kid’s eye view. Keep in mind that if the child can see the item, he or she may be able to find a way to get to it. Find out which tables, chairs, and bookshelves your child can see and reach—then you’ll know which ones need extra policing for choking hazards. Don’t forget to check between the couch cushions and under the couch. Other good ideas:

- *Keep potentially dangerous household items, such as toothpicks, extra buttons, and safety pins completely out of a child’s reach. A box in a high cupboard or on top of the refrigerator, or a locked sewing basket make good storage places.*
- *Home workshop materials and tools such as screws, nails, nuts, and bolts need to be kept well away from kids. Lock your workroom or workbench.*
- *Jewelry is often tempting to young children, so keep all jewelry—especially earrings and rings—away from a child’s reach and out of sight.*
- *Install clips or locks on lower kitchen cabinets to prevent children from opening them.*

Perform Routine Checks of a Child’s Possessions

With use, many of a child’s own possessions can become unsafe. For example, buttons can become loose and fall off a sweater or jacket, or a toy may start to come apart. All of the things that a child

uses, plays with, or wears should be routinely inspected for safety. Toys are especially apt to get damaged and become dangerous. Getting in the habit of looking at things with an eye toward safety will go a long way toward preventing a choking accident.

What if My Child Chokes?

Sometimes, despite all precautionary measures, a child will choke on something. It’s good to be prepared to help a choking victim by learning how to perform a finger sweep of the mouth and other potentially life-saving techniques.

A suggestion: Practice having children open their mouths wide—as a game. You can even touch and count teeth as part of the game. Then, later, it will be easy to remove an earring or coin from your child’s mouth.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents participate in either the American Heart Association’s Pediatric Basic Life Support Course or the American Red Cross’s Infant and Child CPR Course.

Want More Information?

National SAFE KIDS Campaign, 202-662-0600,
www.safekids.org
American Academy of Pediatrics, 847-434-4000,
www.aap.org
SafeUSA, 888-252-7751, www.cdc.gov/safeusa

Potential Causes of Choking in Children

Food Items: **Nuts**, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, etc.
Raw vegetables such as celery, carrots, and peas; whole olives; and cherry tomatoes
Hard candy, lollipops, and cough drops; taffy; marshmallows; caramels, and jellybeans
Popcorn
Raw, unpeeled fruit slices such as apples and pears; whole grapes, cherries with pits; dried fruits such as raisins or apricots
Chunks of food, especially meat or poultry; hot dogs or sausages served whole or cut in “coins;” cheese cubes
Spoonfuls of peanut butter
Snack chips

Non-Food Items: **Coins**, button-cell batteries
Buttons (loose as well as those attached to clothing)
Deflated or broken latex balloons
Pencils, crayons, and erasers; pen and marker caps
Rings, earrings
Nails, screws, staples, safety pins, tacks, etc.
Small toys, such as tiny figures, balls or marbles, or toys with small parts
Holiday decorations, including tinsel
Small rocks
Damaged or loose nipples on pacifiers or bottles

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