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Health and Safety Alert Choking



Choking is a major cause of medical injuries that can be prevented. Choking is a blockage of the upper airway by food or an object that prevents someone from breathing.

Choking is a medical emergency that requires fast action; including an immediate call to 911 and first aid.

The purpose of this Alert is to provide information on signs of choking, foods commonly connected to choking incidents, risk factors (including diagnosis and eating style), actions to be taken and preventative measures.

Signs of choking:

- Inability to talk
- Difficulty breathing or noisy breathing
- Inability to cough forcefully
- Skin, lips, or nails turning blue or dusky
- Loss of consciousness

Foods commonly choked on:

- Sandwiches- leading cause of choking incidents involving NJ DDD consumers
 - Peanut butter and jelly was involved in the majority of these incidents
- Meat
 - Hamburgers, hotdogs, and chicken
- Vegetables
 - Particularly when they are uncooked
- Fruit
 - Particularly fruits with their skin on
- Snack foods
 - Popcorn, nuts, hard candy, chewing gum, and raisins

Risks factors:

- Medical conditions that increase an individuals risk of choking
 - Dysphasia
 - Asthma
 - Lung disease
 - Emphysema
 - Sleep apnea
 - Allergic reactions causing swelling of the throat
 - Persons with developmental disabilities

Why do persons with developmental disabilities have a higher risk of choking?

A list of common issues that place a person with developmental disabilities at a higher risk for choking/aspirating include:

- Decreased or absent protective airway reflexes such as occur in cerebral palsy
- Poor or underdeveloped oral motor skills that do not permit adequate chewing or swallowing
- Gastroesophageal reflux disorder (GERD) which may cause aspiration of refluxed stomach contents
- Epileptic seizures
- Inappropriate fluid consistency and/or food textures
- Medication side effects which decrease/relax voluntary muscles causing delayed swallowing or suppression of protective reflexes of gagging and coughing
- Impaired mobility may leave the person unable to properly position themselves for adequate swallowing

Common causes of choking:

- Eating or drinking too fast
- Not chewing food enough prior to swallowing
- Inattention to eating
 - Laughing or talking while eating
 - Walking, playing or running with eating utensil or objects in mouth
 - Distracted by other persons or activities
- Placing too much food in one's mouth
- Food stealing

- Swallowing inedible objects (PICA)
- 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
- Teeth related factors
 - Edentulous
 - Having only a few teeth or a tooth ache which may cause someone to not chew his or her food properly
 - Dentures
 - Can make it difficult to sense whether food is fully chewed before it is swallowed
 - If dentures fit poorly or hurt, a person might not bother to chew his or her food or may not wear them at all and not be able to chew their food
- Inadequate supervision
- Inadequately trained staff
 - Not familiar with prescribed diet
 - Poor assisted eating techniques
 - Allowing poor positioning

What to do if someone chokes:

- call 911
 - follow agency policy on Life Threatening Emergencies (Danielle’s Law)
 - maintain a phone in the room during mealtimes
 - post information to communicate to 911 operator near phone
- Follow your first aid training
- If individual’s airway is blocked, perform the Heimlich maneuver



- This has been extremely successful in dislodging food in the airway
- Notify primary care physician

Preventative measures:

- Educate caregivers on the importance of mealtime safety
- Supervision of all individuals must be high priority
- Assign point people for mealtime monitoring to improve accountability

- Be especially watchful of individuals with mealtime concerns related to eating style (i.e., eating too fast and overstuffing mouth)
- Document mealtime concerns in the communication log
 - Concerns should be reviewed by appropriate personnel to determine if :
 - An assessment of eating/swallowing skills is needed
 - specific mealtime monitoring strategies are needed
 - a modification to prescribed diet is needed
 - Adaptive feeding equipment is needed
- Follow prescribed diets
 - Communicate promptly diet changes to all settings
- Use adaptive equipment and aides as indicated
 - Ensure that equipment is in adequate condition prior to using
- Be cautious of leaving food items on display
- Include a topic of mealtime concerns at all staff meetings
- Provide administrative oversight during mealtimes