



State of New Jersey  
**Department of Human Services**  
**Division of Developmental Disabilities**

# DDD PREVENTION BULLETIN



## Choking

Choking is a major cause of medical injuries, but it can be prevented. This bulletin alert contains critically important information for caregivers of individuals with developmental disabilities. It provides information on signs of choking, food commonly connected to choking incidents, risk factors (including diagnosis and eating style), actions to take and preventative measures.

Choking is a blockage of the upper airway by food or an object that prevents someone from breathing. It is a medical emergency that requires fast action, to include an immediate call to 911, followed by efforts to dislodge the object that is causing the choking.

### ***Why are individuals with developmental disabilities at risk of choking?***

People with developmental disabilities are more likely to have a number of common characteristics that place them at high risk for choking/aspirating. Some of these characteristics include:

- ◆ Decreased or absent protective airway reflexes
- ◆ Poor oral motor skills that do not permit adequate chewing or swallowing
- ◆ Medication side effects
- ◆ Impaired mobility/positioning

Other risk factors include medical conditions such as:

- ◆ Dysphagia
- ◆ Asthma
- ◆ Lung disease
- ◆ Emphysema
- ◆ Sleep apnea
- ◆ Seizures
- ◆ Gastroesophageal reflux disorder (GERD)

### **Signs of choking:**

- ◆ Inability to talk
- ◆ Inability to cough forcefully
- ◆ Loss of consciousness
- ◆ Wide-eyed panicked look on face
- ◆ Difficulty breathing or noisy breathing
- ◆ Skin, lips, or nails turning blue or dusky
- ◆ Clutching the throat or chest

## Common causes of choking:

- ◆ Eating or drinking too fast
- ◆ Not chewing food well enough prior to swallowing
- ◆ Distracted while eating (laughing/talking/moving with food in mouth)
- ◆ Distracted by other persons or activities
- ◆ Over stuffing mouth
- ◆ Food stealing
- ◆ Swallowing inedible objects (Pica)
- ◆ Incorrect diet texture - liquids or food items
- ◆ Poorly fit dentures
- ◆ Edentulous (having no teeth)
- ◆ Inadequate supervision
- ◆ Inadequately trained staff
- ◆ Not familiar with prescribed diet
- ◆ Poorly assisted eating techniques
- ◆ Allowing poor positioning

## Special Risks for People with Swallowing Disorders

Food that is difficult to chew or swallow because of its shape, size, or texture further increases the risk of choking. People with swallowing disorders should avoid these foods:

- Hot Dogs
- Tossed Salads
- Chicken on bone
- Marshmallows
- Meat Chunks
- Canned Fruit
- Hard Candy
- Raw vegetables (carrot, celery, etc.)
- Potato/Corn/Tortilla Chips
- Nuts And Nut butters (e.g., peanut butter)
- Popcorn
- Raisins
- Grapes
- Bagels or other chewy bread
- Raw Hard Fruits (apple, grapes, etc.)
- Rice
- Pretzels
- Hard Beans
- Chewing Gum
- Caramel

## What to do if someone chokes:

Anyone unable to cough forcefully, speak or breathe may be choking:

- ◆ Immediately call 911
- ◆ Follow agency policy on Life Threatening Emergencies (Danielle's Law)
- ◆ If trained, respond to an individual who is choking by following the guidelines of the organization by which you were trained:
  - American Red Cross – five back blows, five abdominal thrusts and continue until medical personnel arrive and take over, the object is dislodged or the individual becomes unconscious
  - American Heart Association – perform abdominal thrusts continue until medical personnel arrive and take over, the object is dislodged or the individual becomes unconscious
- ◆ If the individual becomes unconscious, guide them to the floor and begin CPR if trained
- ◆ Notify primary care physician after the emergency is under control

## Preventative measures:

- ◆ It is advisable to maintain a phone in the room during mealtimes
- ◆ Post information on how to communicate to 911 operators near phone
- ◆ Educate caregivers on the importance of mealtime safety
- ◆ Improve accountability by assigning point people for mealtime monitoring
- ◆ Closely monitor people who eat too fast and overstuff their mouth. Document mealtime concerns in the communication log
- ◆ Follow prescribed diets
- ◆ Promptly communicate diet changes to all settings
- ◆ Provide administrative oversight during mealtimes
- ◆ Concerns should be reviewed by appropriate personnel to determine if an assessment of eating/swallowing skills is needed, if mealtime monitoring strategies are needed, if prescribed diet needs to be modified or if adaptive feeding equipment is needed
- ◆ Be cautious of leaving food items accessible that could pose a choking risk

### DISCLAIMER

This material is being provided strictly to alert staff of DDD and DDD's providers, families, individuals, and the general public about the risks of choking. At no time is this alert to substitute for training nor is it to suffice as training. Staff who have been trained in how to properly administer to an individual who is choking are expected and required to use their training to assist those in need.

Olmstead Resource Team



Physical Nutritional Management



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