



STATE OF NEW JERSEY  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
DIVISION OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES  
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## Health and Safety Alert Choking



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.

Choking is a major cause of medical injuries, but it can be prevented.

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

**This Alert contains critically important information for caregivers of individuals with developmental disabilities. People with developmental disabilities are at a high risk of choking.**

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

People with developmental disabilities share a number of common characteristics that place them at high risk for choking/aspirating, to include:

- Decreased or absent protective airway reflexes as occurs 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
- Inability to swallow certain fluid consistencies and/or food textures
- Medication side effects that decrease or relax voluntary muscles, causing delayed swallowing or suppression of the protective gag and cough reflexes
- Impaired mobility, which may leave individuals unable to properly position themselves for adequate swallowing

### **Risks factors:**

Some medical conditions that increase an individual's risk of choking are:

- Dysphagia
- Asthma
- Lung disease
- Emphysema
- Sleep apnea
- Allergic reactions that cause swelling of the throat

### **Signs of choking:**

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

### **Food that commonly causes choking:**

- Sandwiches-
  - **Leading cause of choking incidents involving NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities consumers**
  - Peanut butter and jelly was involved in the majority of these incidents
- Meat
  - Steak, hamburgers, hotdogs and chicken
- Vegetables
  - Particularly when they are uncooked
- Fruit
  - Particularly fruits with their skin on
- Snack food
  - Popcorn, nuts, hard candy, chewing gum, and raisins

## **Special Risks for People with Swallowing Disorders**

People with swallowing disorders are at a higher risk of aspiration (breathing food into the lungs) of food and liquids. Food that is difficult to chew or swallow because of its shape, size, or texture further increases the risk of aspiration or choking. People with swallowing disorders should avoid the following types of food:

Hot dogs	Marshmallows	Hard Candy	Potato Chips
Tossed Salad	Meat Chunks	Raw Apple	Chewing Gum
Chicken on bone	Corn Chips	Pretzels	Nuts (all types)
Popcorn	Hard Beans	Thick Chewy Bread	Tortilla Chips
Bagels	Grapes	Raw Carrots	Caramel
Raisins	Canned Fruit	Celery	Rice

### **Common causes of choking:**

- Eating or drinking too fast
- Not chewing food well 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 no teeth)
  - 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, individuals:
      - might not bother to chew their food
      - may not wear them and be unable to chew their food
- Inadequate supervision
- Inadequately trained staff
  - Not familiar with prescribed diet
  - Poorly assisted eating techniques
  - Allowing poor positioning

### **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)
    - It is advisable to maintain a phone in the room during mealtimes
    - Post information on how to communicate to 911 operator near phone
- If you have been trained to respond to a choking victim by giving sets of five back blows and five abdominal thrusts, do so immediately. Continue until the object causing the choking is dislodged and the individual can cough forcefully, speak or breathe, or until the individual becomes unconscious.
- If you have not been trained as above, 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.
  - Abdominal thrusts have been extremely successful in dislodging food in the airway
- Notify primary care physician after the emergency is under control

### **Preventative measures:**

- Educate caregivers on the importance of mealtime safety
- Make supervising all individuals at mealtime a high priority
- Improve accountability by assigning point people for mealtime monitoring
- Be especially watchful at mealtime of individuals with 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 prescribed diet needs to be modified
    - Adaptive feeding equipment is needed
- Follow prescribed diets
  - Promptly communicate 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 "mealtime concerns" as a topic at all staff meetings
- Provide administrative oversight during mealtimes

### **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.**