

Preventing Choking in Infants and Young Children

Choking on food is a major cause of fatal injury for young children. Every five days a child in the United States dies from choking on food. Caregivers working with young children need to be aware of risky foods and eating behaviors, and how to prevent choking.

CHILDREN AT GREATEST RISK

Infants and young children tend to put everything in their mouths, but they do not have the molar teeth to chew properly. Children are at the highest risk of choking on food from birth through age 3. They remain at high risk until about age 4 when their chewing and swallowing abilities improve.

RISKY EATING BEHAVIORS

Certain eating behaviors or situations increase a child's risk of choking on food. These include:

- propping a bottle in an infant's mouth;
- giving an infant a bottle with a nipple that has too large a hole;
- feeding solid foods before an infant is developmentally ready;
- feeding an infant too quickly;
- feeding while an infant or child is walking, playing, talking, laughing, crying or lying down;
- serving difficult-to-chew foods to infants and children with poor chewing and swallowing abilities;
- feeding foods that may cause choking; and
- feeding an infant or child without close supervision.



HIGH-RISK FOODS

Many foods associated with choking are well-liked by young children. A food's potential to cause choking is usually related to one or more of the following characteristics: size, shape and consistency.

- **Size:** Both large and small pieces of food can cause choking. Small pieces of food, especially those less than half an inch in diameter (e.g., nuts and seeds), most frequently cause choking because they are small enough to get into the airway if children try to swallow them before they are properly chewed. Larger pieces of food, though more difficult to swallow, may be harder to chew and more likely to completely block the airway if inhaled.
- **Shape:** Round foods shaped like a sphere or a cylinder (e.g., grapes, hot dogs, popcorn and round candies like gumdrops or sour balls), may cause choking because they are likely to block the airway more completely than other shapes.
- **Consistency:** Several consistencies of food are more likely to cause choking, including:
 - firm, smooth or slippery foods that slide down the throat before chewing, such as hotdogs, grapes, hard candy *, raw peas and peanuts;
 - small, dry or hard foods that are difficult to chew and easy to swallow whole, such as popcorn *, pretzels, potato chips *, corn chips *, nuts and seeds, and small pieces of raw carrots; and
 - sticky or tough foods that do not break apart easily and are hard to remove from the airway, such as peanut butter, tough meat, raisins and other dried fruit, and caramel candy *.

** These foods do not meet the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal pattern requirements.*

Preventing Choking, continued

HELP PREVENT CHOKING

Caregivers working with young children must take the necessary steps to make food safe and protect children from choking. Every child is different. One child may be able to eat certain foods better than another child of the same age. Remember that young children can sometimes choke on foods that are usually safe. When feeding infants:

- hold them while giving a bottle;
- make sure the hole in the nipple of the bottle is not too large;
- avoid using teething pain relief medicine at mealtimes since it may interfere with chewing; and
- serve foods that are appropriate for the child's development.

Watch children during meals and snacks to make sure they:

- sit quietly in an upright position;
- eat slowly;
- chew food well before swallowing; and
- eat small portions at one time.

Fix table foods so they are easy to chew.

- Grind up tough foods.
- Cut food into small pieces or thin slices.
- Cut round foods, like hot dogs, into short strips rather than round pieces. *
- Cut grapes into quarters lengthwise.
- Remove all bones from fish, chicken and meat.
- Cook food until it is soft.
- Remove seeds and pits from fruits.
- Avoid nuts or seeds unless finely ground or chopped. *
- Do not serve peanut butter until a child is age 1, then spread it thinly. *

* These foods should not be served to children younger than 1.

FIRST AID FOR CHOKING

If the child is choking but can breathe, call the rescue squad and until help comes:

- keep the child calm;
- have the child sit down and cough;
- do not slap the child on the back;

- do not give the child a drink; and
- do not hold the child upside down.

If the child cannot breathe, cough, speak or cry follow the first aid for choking taught by the American Red Cross. For more information, contact the [American Red Cross](#).

SUMMARY

Choking can occur anytime and anywhere there is food. Child care settings can help protect children from choking by avoiding or modifying at-risk foods, providing close supervision of mealtimes, and encouraging young children to eat meals sitting quietly. Following these guidelines will help ensure that mealtime remains a safe time for young children.

For more information on feeding young children, visit the Connecticut State Department of Education's [Nutrition Policies and Guidance for the Child and Adult Care Food Program](#) Web page or contact the [CACFP staff](#) in the Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education, 25 Industrial Park Road, Middletown, CT 06457.

This document is available at
www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/deps/nutrition/cacfp/infants/preventchoking.pdf.

Source: *Feeding Infants: A Guide for Use in the Child Care Food Program* (FNS-258). U. S. Department of Agriculture, 2001.
www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/feeding_infants.html



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