

DDD PREVENTION BULLETIN | **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.

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

Why are individuals with developmental disabilities at risk of choking?

People with developmental disabilities often have 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
- Sleep apnea
- Asthma
- Seizures
- Lung disease
- Emphysema
- Gastroesophageal Reflux Disorder (GERD)



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 grabbing from someone's plate, the garbage, or food left unattended
- 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

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Special risks for people with or without swallowing disorders

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

- Hot Dogs
- Meat Chunks
- Chicken on Bone
- Tossed Salads
- Raw Hard Fruits
- Grapes
- Raw Vegetables (carrot, celery, etc.)
- Chewy Breads
- Rice
- Potato/Corn/Tortilla Chips
- Nuts and Nut butters (e.g., caramel peanut butter)
- Hard Candy
- Popcorn
- Raisins
- Marshmallows
- Hard Beans
- Canned Fruit
- Bagels or other
- Pretzels



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
- Train caregivers on how to prepare prescribed diets as per an individual's approved service plan
- Communicate any diet changes to all settings and update the service plan immediately
- Provide close supervision without any distractions for all individuals during mealtime
- Be cautious of food items left unattended as this could pose a choking risk
- Closely monitor people who eat too fast and overstuff their mouth. Document mealtime concerns in the communication log
- Concerns should be reviewed by a trained professional 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

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

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 on how to properly administer life-saving techniques to an individual who is choking, are expected and required to use their training to assist those in need.

If you have any questions regarding this material or would like to schedule a training, please contact The DDD Resource Team at ddd.resourceteam@dhs.nj.gov.