



Choking and Suffocation

Choking and suffocation are common causes of accidental injury and death in children. Each year hundreds of children aged 0 to 15 years present to Perth Children's Hospital Emergency Department as a result of a "threat to breathing" injury. Nearly one third of all presentations are admitted to hospital for further treatment.

Children under five years old represent approximately three-quarters of all children who present to PCH ED for choking.



Choking on Food

Food is the most common cause of choking for all age groups, accounting for over half of all choking cases. Foods that are typically choking hazards are hard foods that require a reasonable amount of chewing and small solid foods. Common foods involved in choking are:

- Raw carrot
- Raw apple pieces
- Nuts
- Chicken and fish bones
- Lollies

Young children are particularly at risk because they have smaller airways and can bite food with their incisor teeth, but their back teeth are not developed enough to chew and grind food well¹.

Children are more likely to choke if they are moving whilst they are eating, especially if they are running or playing.

Prevention

- Avoid giving hard food to young children. Raw carrot, celery sticks and apples should be chopped into small pieces and tough skins removed.
- Grating, mashing, removing skin and chopping into small pieces are suitable ways to prepare food.
- Supervise young children while they are eating.
- Make sure young children sit quietly while they are eating.
- Children who are upset should not be made to eat - they are more at risk of choking.

Choking on Non-Food Items

Nearly all children who choke on non-food items are under five years of age. Particularly hazardous objects include buttons, batteries, coins, pen tops and toys that contain small parts or pieces that can break off toys.

Prevention

- Supervision of young children is essential.
- Check children's play areas regularly for small, potential choking objects.
- Buy toys that are suitable for your child's age by following the labels. Toys that can break easily and have parts that can come loose should be avoided.
- Keep older children's toys away from young children. This may mean separate play areas for children of different ages.

First Aid for Choking

Check to see if the child is able to breathe.

If the child is breathing:

They may be able to dislodge the food by coughing. Do not hit the child on the back as this can dislodge the food to a more dangerous position. Stay with the child, and if their breathing has not improved within a few minutes, call **000** for an ambulance.

If the child is not breathing:

Place the child face down over your lap so that the child's head is lower than the child's chest, and give four sharp blows with the heel of your hand on the back between shoulder blades. This should dislodge the food. If the child is still not breathing, call **000** for an ambulance service operator and they will tell you what to do next.



Suffocation

Suffocation is the blockage of the supply of oxygen and can be caused by an item blocking the airway or covering the mouth and nose.

Plastics

- Thin plastic bags, plastic wrap and dry cleaning bags are particularly dangerous. A child can suffocate if they pull these over their heads. Always store them out of reach and tie a knot in them before throwing them out.
- Plastic covers on cot and bassinet mattresses should be removed before use. These are not a substitute for a heavy-duty thick waterproof sheet.
- Do not give balloons, particularly un-inflated balloons to young children. Remove any broken balloons or plastic, if inhaled they may block the child's airway.

Enclosed spaces

- Remove the doors of old refrigerators, dryers etc. before disposing off.
- Ensure that potential hiding places are made inaccessible or that they have adequate ventilation.
- Make sure that toy box lids will not close suddenly and that they can be easily removed.

Clothing

- Avoid ties, ribbons or hoods on baby's clothing.
- Always remove a baby's bib before putting them down to sleep.
- Avoid necklaces and other jewellery that can get caught, including items such as amber beads. If you are using these items, remove them before putting your child down to sleep.
- Be aware of cords and strings on clothing that can catch on play equipment.

Pillows and Mattresses

- Pillows and bumper pads are unnecessary for children under the age of two.
- Choosing a firm mattress is most important to prevent accidental suffocation or SIDS.
- Babies and young children have sometimes suffocated when they have been lying down on soft surfaces (e.g. bean bags, water beds, etc.).
- Putting a baby to sleep on its back is most important. Contact Red Nose for more information.
www.rednose.com.au



References:

¹ Victorian Injury Surveillance and Applied Research. Hazard: Issue No. 60. Unintentional asphyxia (choking, suffocation and strangulation) in children aged 0-14 years. 2005.

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