



Prevent Choking #18-08-23

Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are at greater risk of choking. In fact, choking is one of the leading causes of medical emergencies and accidental deaths for the people we serve and often these incidents can be prevented with proper planning, communication, supervision and providing the right diet textures. It is important that we recognize our role in identification of swallowing issues, safe eating practices, choking prevention, and first aid.

Common Terms

- Choking is the blocking of airways by food, liquids, or foreign objects.
- Aspiration is the inhaling of foods, liquids, or foreign objects into the lungs. Some people call this "going down the wrong pipe".
- Dysphagia means swallowing difficulties.

Why are people with IDD at risk of choking?

Problems with swallowing (dysphagia) and aspiration are common issues for people with developmental disabilities due to:

- Underlying medical conditions such as Cerebral Palsy, which can affect the muscles involved in swallowing as well as the muscles in the arms, legs, and neck.
- Poor oral motor skills impacting swallowing.
- Poor impulse control leading to pacing issues.
- Food stealing.
- Medication side effects.

Video: Remembering Garry



Fast Facts:

- Peanut butter (usually paired with bread) is the most choked on item, followed by hotdogs and meat like chicken.
- Choking interventions to save a person's life were implemented 352 last year.
- Seventy-five (75%) of 2022 choking deaths occurred at the person's residence. Other incidents occurred in a hospital, vehicle, nursing facility and office setting.
- In about 35% of choking death MUIs, the person has had at least one previous choking incident.
- The average age of the person that choked in 2022 was 51 years.
- About 30% of the people that passed away due to choking related incidents had known issues with eating too fast.

Choking Related MUIs (2014-2022)									
Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
# of Choking Medical Emergencies	389	347	422	381	381	425	362	361	373
# Successful Life Saving Intervention Provided	375	339	406	364	357	418	345	352	352
# of Choking Death per year	18	8	16	17	21	7	17	9	20



Signs of Choking:

- Inability to talk
- Wide-eyed panicked look on face
- Clutching at throat
- Inability to cough forcefully
- Face turning red
- Lips, skin or nail beds turning blue
- Loss of Conscious

If Someone is Choking

- Follow First Aid training.
- Call 911.
- If someone else can call 911, perform abdominal thrusts, formerly known as the Heimlich maneuver.
- For a person using a wheelchair or with a physical characteristic making it difficult to use the abdominal thrust.
- Move person to flat, hard surface.
- Initiate CPR chest compressions to help unblock airway.
- If abdominal thrust is successful, immediately notify a health care professional for check-up.

Things to Remember

- If the choking person can cough, let them do so. Stay with the person to encourage them to cough. If the object is visible in the mouth, attempt a finger sweep.
- If an adult has a completely blocked airway, give up to 5 blows between the shoulder blades with the heel of your hand.
- If blockage is not relieved, employ abdominal thrusts. Continue cycles of 5 back blows and 5 abdominal thrusts until object is coughed up or the person starts to breathe or cough.
- The American Red Cross includes back blows as an intervention and the American Heart Association does not.

Common causes and contributing factors in choking related incidents:

- Eating too fast
- Person served wrong diet texture
- Supports per the person's plan were not provided
- Person not sitting up while eating
- Dentures that are not properly fitting
- Distracted while eating (laughing, in car, doing other activities)
- Staff not trained on diet textures



Pictured above: Thin (normal), Nectar (thickened), Honey (thickened), Pudding (thickened)

Preventative Measures

- Always communicate if a person is having difficulty swallowing, coughs during or after eating/drinking, or refuses to eat certain foods that might prove challenging.
- Advocate for assessments and evaluations to be completed by medical professionals such as speech language pathologist and others.
- Make sure that the person's plan addresses risks associated with choking and how to support that person. Check to make sure the plan is accurate and does not include contradictory information about eating and drinking supports.
- Communicate diet changes and swallowing concerns across all settings.
- Have a phone available in locations where people are eating.
- Provide proper supervision when people are eating and drinking.
- Be cautious of leaving food or other items out that may pose a choking risk.
- Practice your First Aid training and what to do in case of a choking emergency.
- Closely monitor people that eat fast or take other's food.
- Make sure people understand the diet texture and can demonstrate how to do it. Use pictures when possible.
- Supervisors should routinely monitor during meals to offer support and provide training.
- Ask questions if you are unclear.
- Advocate for safe eating practices and supports.



It is important to note that there are many different types of supports that people with swallowing (also known as dysphagia) are provided. It is important that we provide the person based on their assessed needs and individualized plans.

To ensure proper supports are provided, we must all have a good understanding of what that person needs and what that looks like.

Common terminology, demonstrations and pictures provide meaningful context to different diet and liquid consistencies. The International Dysphagia Diet Standardization Initiative (IDDSI) is one commonly used classification for food and drinks.

Commonly Choked on Foods

- Peanut Butter especially combined with bread
- Hot dogs
- Bread products
- Fruit (grapes, apples)
- Nuts
- Raw Vegetables (carrots, broccoli)
- Candy and marshmallows

The IDDSI Framework

Providing a common terminology for describing food textures and drink thicknesses to improve safety for individuals with swallowing difficulties.



© The International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative 2019 @ <https://iddsi.org/framework/>
Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 4.0 License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>.
Derivative works extending beyond language translation are NOT PERMITTED.

- Foods consisting of two different textures such as pancakes and syrup
- Gloves, pen caps, and cloth for people with PICA

The Office of NY OPWDD offers a standardized food consistency language as illustrated below.



Pureed food



Ground diet



¼ inch food



½ inch food



1 inch food



Whole food

<https://opwdd.ny.gov/providers/choking>