

# Health Alert

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## Choking: A Medical Emergency

**Swift Action is Essential to Prevent Irreversible Harm or Death!**

**IMPORTANT: This Health Alert is being reissued to clarify the section: Action to Take for an Individual Choking. All caregivers should follow First Aid/CPR training instructions for an individual who is choking. ODP intended to emphasize the importance to call 911 at the appropriate time and not delay the call by seeking supervisory approval.**

This Health Alert is intended to make all providers, staff and other caregivers aware of this serious issue of choking. All should become familiar with resources to aid in the identification of individuals at risk for choking, the training of staff and the appropriate documentation of special dietary needs and choking precautions.

### **Two key issues to promote safety for individuals:**

1. The information contained in the participants' care plans, including medical evaluations/recommendations, assessments, ISPs, and any treatment plans used by the agency (hereafter "care plans") must be accurate, consistent and followed precisely for feeding plans, supervision of the individual while eating to maintain safety, proper positioning, and the use of specialized equipment.
2. All staff providing service to an individual must be trained on the individual's dietary needs, including awareness of proper foods and food textures; supervision needs during meals; proper positioning during meals; and the use of specialized equipment related to the risk of aspiration and choking.

## **Action to Take for an Individual Choking:**

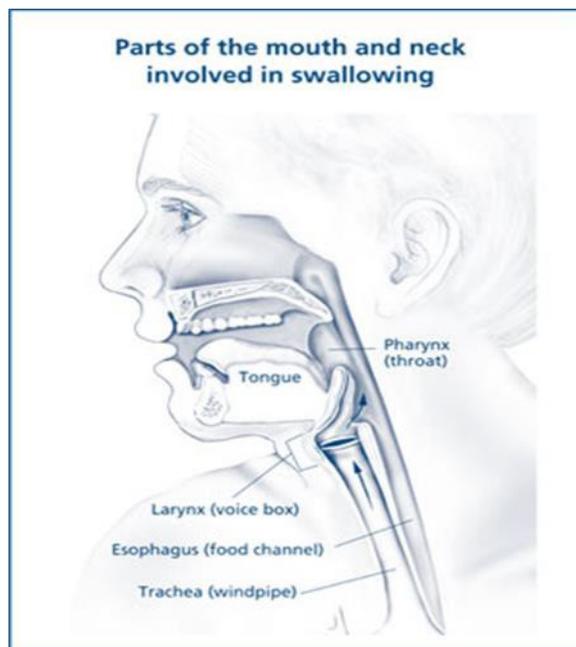
- Immediately begin First Aid for an individual who is conscious and choking, meaning the individual is alert and unable to cough, speak or breathe. If possible, have someone else call 911 at the same time.
- If the individual is unconscious, call 911 if this has not already been done, and begin First Aid/CPR care for an unconscious choking individual.
- **When calling 911, do not delay by seeking supervisory approval prior to calling 911.**
- Contact the health care practitioner after any episode of choking. **A single choking event may be a warning sign for future choking events.**

## **Signs of an Individual Choking. This is an Emergency**

- Anxious or agitated state
- Reddened face
- Difficulty breathing
- Noisy breathing
- Severe coughing or gagging
- Hands at throat
- Not able to talk
- Not able to breath
- Skin turning gray or blue
- Loss of consciousness

## Defining Dysphagia, Aspiration, and Choking:

**Dysphagia**, which is the term for difficulty in swallowing, is a frequent cause of choking. Dysphagia can develop at any time and is usually related to underlying medical or physical conditions. It can cause both choking and aspiration, either of which can lead to injury, illness and death. The image below shows the closeness between the esophagus, which is the channel that carries food from the mouth to the stomach, and the trachea or windpipe leading to the lungs. The closeness of the esophagus and the trachea helps to explain why swallowing and choking issues are so serious.



*Image courtesy of: National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

**Aspiration** is when fluid, food or saliva enters the lungs. A person may choke, cough or gag when this happens but it may occur without any signs. This is called silent aspiration. Aspiration can lead to wheezing, difficulty breathing and/or pneumonia, which can cause death.

**Choking** is when food or other items become lodged in the back of the individual's throat causing a blockage of the person's airway. This blockage prevents air from entering the lungs. This deprives the body of the necessary oxygen it needs. **This can quickly lead to irreversible brain damage and death.**

## Who is at risk for Choking and Aspiration?

Individuals:

- With swallowing disorders
- With problems affecting the muscles used to swallow. For example, the decompensated elderly, those with seizures, cerebral palsy, ALS, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, myasthenia gravis or dementia
- Who have had strokes, traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord injuries and problems affecting the head and neck
- With decayed or missing teeth or improperly fitted dentures
- Who are taking certain medications
- With Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)
- With feeding tubes
- With tracheostomies

## What are the Signs of Individuals at Risk for Choking?

- Coughing or excessive drooling while eating
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath while or after eating
- Making statements such as "food is getting stuck" or "going down the wrong pipe."
- Frequent throat clearing while eating
- Eating too fast or packing one's mouth.

## Ways of Preventing Choking and Aspiration

- Identify the symptoms of dysphagia.
  - Consider getting a dysphagia assessment for the individual. Support for identifying dysphagia is available through the health care practitioner as well as from the Health Care Quality Units.
- Notify the individual's physician or speech therapist of any concerns so the appropriate testing can be completed to identify the issue.
- A swallowing study may be recommended by the health care practitioner.
- Review and follow the care plans.
- Provide appropriate supervision of the individual and assistance with eating.
- Prepare food as instructed on the care plans.
- Avoid food identified on the care plans that will increase risk.
- Utilize identified adaptive equipment (specialized cups, utensils, plates etc.) with every meal and with snacks.
- Check that dentures are in place and properly secured and oral hygiene is completed as per the care plans
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## **What Training and Resources are Available to Decrease the Risk of Choking?**

- All staff should be currently certified in CPR and First Aid
- Staff should be trained and oriented in all aspects of the care plans for the individuals for whom staff are providing service
- Policy and Procedure for calling 911 should address events that occur both in and outside of the individual's residence

### **Additional education and resources are available through:**

- American Heart Association: [HeartSaver CPR, AED and First Aid Training Course-information available online](#) or by calling 1-877-AHA-4CPR or 1-877-242-4277
- [American Red Cross First Aid Certification information available online](#)
- [Health Care Quality Units \(HCQUs\) online](#)
- NIDCD Fact Sheet | Voice, Speech, and Language: [Dysphagia, NIH Publication No. 13-4307](#), October 2010, reprinted February 2014.
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), [Adult Dysphagia](#)