

What You May Not Know About Airway Obstruction

The Problem

- Airway obstruction is the number one cause of unintentional injury-related death among infants under the age of 1. (*Safe Kids USA*)
- In Missouri, in 2006, seven children over the age of one year died of unintentional airway obstruction injuries; of those, three were young children under the age of four years. (*Missouri Child Fatality Review Program*)
- Young children, especially under the age of three, are particularly vulnerable to airway obstruction injury and death due to the small size of their upper airways, their relative inexperience with chewing, and their natural tendency to put objects in their mouths.

How Does This Occur?

- Injuries occur when children are unable to breathe normally because food or objects block their internal airways (choking).
- When materials block or cover children's external airways, they will suffocate.
- When items become wrapped around a child's neck and interfere with breathing, strangulation will occur.

Preventing Choking

- ◆ The majority of airway obstruction deaths are due to choking. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests not feeding children under the age of 4 round, firm food unless it is chopped completely. Round, firm foods are often choking hazards. Choking can occur when infants and young children do not grind or chew their food and then try to swallow it whole.
- ◆ The following foods are choking hazards: hot dogs; nuts and seeds; whole grapes; chunks of meat or cheese; hard, gooey, or sticky candy; popcorn; chunks of peanut butter; raw vegetables; fruit chunks, such as apples; and chewing gum. (*American Academy of Pediatrics*)
- ◆ The following household items are choking hazards: balloons; coins; marbles; toys with small parts; small balls; toys that can be squeezed to fit entirely into a child's mouth; pen or marker caps; small button-type batteries; and medicine syringes. (*American Academy of Pediatrics*)
- ◆ The American Academy of Pediatrics lists the following guidelines to prevent choking:
 - Learn CPR
 - Be aware that balloons pose a choking risk to children up to 8 years of age.
 - Keep foods that can cause choking away from children until 4 years old.
 - Insist that children eat at the table, or at least while sitting down.
 - Children should not run, walk, play, or lie down with food in their mouths.
 - Cut food for infants and young children into pieces no larger than one-half inch, and teach them to chew their food well.
 - Be aware of older children's actions. Many choking incidents occur when older brothers or sisters give dangerous food, toys, or small objects to a younger sibling.
 - Avoid toys with small parts, and keep other small household items out of the reach of infants and young children.
 - Follow the age guidelines on toy packages. Age guidelines reflect the safety of a toy based on any possible choking hazard as well as the child's physical and mental abilities at various ages.
 - Do not let infants and young children play with coins.
 - Check under furniture and between cushions for small items children could find and put in their mouths.

Preventing Strangulation

- ◆ According to Safe Kids USA, strangulation can occur among children when consumer products become wrapped around their necks. Common items include clothing drawstrings, ribbons, or other decorations, necklaces, pacifier strings, and window blind and drapery cords.
- ◆ Children can strangle in openings that permit the passage of their bodies, yet are too small for, and entrap their heads. These include spaces in bunk beds, cribs, playground equipment, baby strollers, carriages, and high chairs.
- ◆ Safe Kids USA suggests the following guidelines to prevent strangulation in children:
 - Remove hood and neck drawstrings from all children's outerwear. Never allow children to wear necklaces, purses, scarves or clothing with drawstrings while on playgrounds.
 - Tie up all window blind and drapery cords, or cut the ends and retrofit with safety tassels. The inner cords of blinds should be fitted with cord stops. Never place a crib near a window.
 - Do not allow children under the age of 6 to sleep on the top bunk of a bunk bed. Make sure all spaces between the guardrail and bed frame, and all spaces in the head and foot boards, are less than 3.5 inches.

Preventing Suffocation

- ◆ According to Safe Kids USA, sixty percent of infant suffocation occurs in the sleeping environment. Infants can suffocate when their faces become wedged against or buried in a mattress, pillow, infant cushion or other soft bedding or when someone in the same bed rolls over on them.
- ◆ Infants can also suffocate when their noses and mouths are pressed against a plastic bag.
- ◆ Children have suffocated when they have become trapped in household appliances, such as refrigerators or dryers, and toy chests.
- ◆ Safe Kids USA offers the following guidelines to preventing unintentional suffocation:
 - Place an infant on his/her back on a firm, flat crib mattress in a crib that meets national safety standards.
 - Remove pillows, comforters, toys, and other soft products from the crib.
 - Never hang anything on or above a crib with string or ribbon longer than 7 inches.

The Choking Game

- A CDC study found most fatalities from the choking game have occurred among those 11 years to 16 years old; the average age was 13. Choking game deaths were identified in 31 states, it said.
- Adolescents cut off the flow of blood to the brain, in exchange for a few seconds of feeling lightheaded. Some strangle themselves with a belt, a rope or their bare hands; others push on their chest or hyperventilate. (*G.A.S.P.*)
- The Choking Game may also be called: Blackout, Fainting Game, Space Monkey, Dream Game, Suffocation, Roulette, Passout, Flatliner, Airplaning, Space Monkey, American Dream, Funky Chicken, Tingling, and Gasp.
- Consequences of the Choking Game include: seizures, brain death/damage, retinal hemorrhaging or stroke, and unexpected death.
- According to the CDC, warning signs a child has been engaging in the choking game include: Marks on the neck, severe headaches, bloodshot eyes, disorientation after spending time alone, and ropes, scarves, and belts tied to bedroom furniture or doorknobs or found knotted on the floor.
- Parents and adults should talk to children and teens about the choking game. Children may not know that this activity can kill them or leave them brain damaged.

Resources

- Safe Kids USA, http://www.usa.safekids.org/tier3_cd.cfm?folder_id=540&content_item_id=991
http://www.usa.safekids.org/tier3_cd.cfm?folder_id=301&content_item_id=21470
- American Academy of Pediatrics, http://www.aap.org/publiced/BR_Choking.htm
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC), <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5706a1.htm>
- The DB Foundation, <http://www.chokinggame.net/>