

# Prevention of choking, suffocation and strangulation in young children

Information for parents and caregivers

Choking, suffocation and strangulation are common causes of unintentional (accidental) injury and death in young children. Choking on food and small objects such as toys; suffocation from plastic bags or being wedged between a mattress and cot, or under a pillow; and strangulation from cords on children's clothes and blind/curtain cords are common causes. With choking, suffocation and strangulation, the breathing tubes (airways) become blocked and the child cannot breathe. This causes lack of oxygen to the brain if the airway is blocked.

## Choking

Most parents have had some sort of near-miss choking incident with their young child. Choking on food or a small object may occur at all ages. However, it is a particular problem for young children 0–4 years due to their small breathing tubes (airways) and the fact that they are still developing their teeth and the ability to chew and swallow.

Young children are most at risk of choking on some foods because their incisor teeth erupt 10 months to 2 years before the second molars (at 20–30 months). Thus there is a period of time that children are able to bite off portions of food without being able to fully grind the food before they swallow it.

The most common types of food that young children choke on are nuts, popcorn, corn chips, whole grapes, hard or sticky lollies, foods that have small and hard pieces (such as raw carrot, celery or apple), foods with tough skin such as sausages and hotdogs, and stringy meats such as chicken and steak.

Young children commonly place small objects into their mouth as a means of exploring the world around them. These can be small items such as buttons, batteries, coins, parts from toys, marbles, pen tops, and other small round objects.

## Prevention of choking

### How to make eating safer for young children

There is conflict between the importance for children to eat raw, natural and often more healthy foods, and their ability to chew these foods properly. Some useful advice to consider when preparing food for young children is:

- Do not give foods that can break off into small hard pieces.
- Avoid pieces of raw carrot, celery sticks and chunks of apple (for example). These foods can instead be grated, par boiled so they are slightly softer, or mashed.
- Sausages, frankfurts and other meats with coarse outer skins should be cut into small pieces and the skin/fat removed. Stringy meats such as chicken and steak also need to be cut into small pieces or minced.
- Do not give popcorn, nuts, whole grapes, hard lollies, corn chips or other similar foods to young children.

Because the environment in which children eat also has an impact on safe eating, it is important to:

- Always stay with your young child.
- Make sure that your young child sits quietly while eating.
- Never force your young child to eat, as this may cause them to choke.

### How to prevent choking on non-food objects

- As a rule of thumb, any object smaller than a table tennis ball can be a choking hazard and should be kept well out of reach of young children. This can be difficult with older children in the household, but it is important to stress the necessity of keeping older children's toys away from young children. This may mean separate play areas for children of different ages.
- When buying toys it is important to look carefully at them for choking hazards. Toys should have labelling on them to state what age they are suitable for (for example, suitable for children under three). These labels are not related to the intelligence needed to use the toy, but are an indication of the safety of the product.
- Pen tops have been associated with a number of choking incidents. Look for pens tops with a hole in the top.

## What to do if a young child chokes

Check first if the child is still able to breathe, cough or cry.

**If the child IS breathing, coughing or crying**, the child may be able to dislodge the food by coughing:

- Check the child's mouth for food; remove any food that you can see (scoop it out with your fingers).
- Stay with the child and watch to see if their breathing improves.
- If coughing has not removed the food and your child is not breathing easily, phone 000 for an ambulance.

### If the child is NOT breathing

- Phone 000 for an ambulance.
- If the child is conscious, place them face down over your lap so that their head is lower than their chest.

- Give up to 5 sharp blows between the shoulder blades using the heel of your hand.
- Check the child's mouth after each back blow and remove any food.
- If the child is still not breathing, commence CPR. The ambulance service operator will be able to tell you what to do next.

## Suffocation

A number of household items are potential suffocation hazards for young children. The most obvious are thin plastic bags and plastic wrap. Other less obvious items include pillows, bean bags, balloons, bedding, mattresses, portable cots, disused refrigerators and toy boxes.

### Prevention of suffocation

- Always tie a knot in the plastic bag before storing it or throwing it away.
- Do not give balloons, particularly uninflated balloons, to young children. Older children should be told of the dangers of making 'balloons' by sucking on plastic film or broken balloon pieces. The plastic can be inhaled and block the child's airway. Foil balloons are safer for young children.
- Ensure that a baby's face and head remain uncovered during sleep, as this reduces the risk of suffocation.
- Choose a firm mattress and place a baby on its back to sleep. Babies have suffocated when lying down on soft surfaces such as pillows, bean bags, and water beds.
- Only use cots that meet the mandatory safety standards – Australian Standard AS/NZS 2172.
- Only use portable cots that comply with the mandatory Australian Standard AS/NZS 2195–1999.
- Make sure there is no more than a 20mm gap between the mattress and the side and ends of the cot. This will reduce the risk of a baby getting trapped between the mattress and the sides of the cot.
- Do not use pillows or bumpers in cots for children under two years old. It is possible for them to suffocate if their face is turned down and buried in the pillow or cot bumper, or by getting their head stuck underneath.

## Strangulation

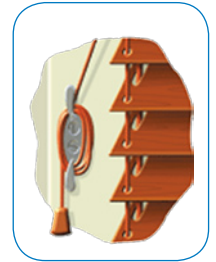
Curtain and blind cords are the most common cause of strangulation in young children. This can happen when the cords are too long, or they end in a loop, and when furniture or bedding is too close to windows. Young children playing or sleeping near curtain and blind cords can accidentally become tangled. Once around a child's neck, a cord can quickly tighten and strangle the child.

## Removing dangers

- Only buy new curtains and blinds which have warning labels to remind you of dangers to children.
- Check with the manufacturer before following the steps below for making your existing blind and curtain cords safe.
- If you are renting your home, ask your landlord or agent to make these changes.

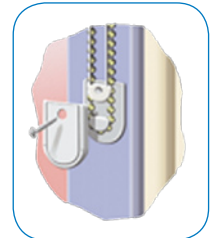
### Long cords

- Cut long loose cords so that they hang at least 160 cm above floor level.
- Screw a cleat into a high spot on the wall or window frame where the young child cannot reach.
- Always wrap the cord around the cleat.



### Loops

- Install a cord tensioning device to tighten long loops and attach the cord to the wall.



### Clothing and Jewellery

Young children can be strangled by items of clothing or jewellery. To prevent this happening:

- Choose clothing without ties or ribbons, and avoid crocheted jackets that may pull tight around a baby's neck.
- Always remove a baby's bib before putting them down to sleep.
- Avoid necklaces and other jewellery that can pull around a baby's neck.
- Be aware of cords and strings on clothing e.g. parkas and hooded jumpers that can catch on play equipment or furniture.
- If using a dummy cord, make sure it is no longer than 10 cm.

## For more information, contact:

**Kidsafe SA Inc.**  
**Women's and Children's Hospital**  
**72 King William Rd,**  
**North Adelaide SA 5006**  
**Phone: (08) 8161 6318**  
**Email: [sa@kidsafe.org.au](mailto:sa@kidsafe.org.au)**  
**Website: [www.kidsafesa.com.au](http://www.kidsafesa.com.au)**

**Kidsafe © 2010**