

Choking

How carers, nurses and family can reduce or prevent choking

What is choking?

Choking is a severe difficulty in breathing because of a constricted or obstructed throat or lack of air.

Partial choking: the Patient can still breathe and cough, but with difficulty.

Complete choking: complete obstruction of the airway and **not** able to breathe, speak or cough. This is a medical emergency as they can become unresponsive and require Basic Life Support / CPR.

Signs of Complete Choking:

- Sudden inability to speak, breathe or cough after eating / drinking;
- Signs of panic or distress including hand signals;
- Clutching, grasping or pointing to chest or throat;
- Gaging or wheezing;
- Red puffy face;
- Disorientation / passing out / unresponsive / unconscious;
- Turning blue / cyanosis (around lips, face, fingernails).

What to do:

- **Partial choking** (with effective cough):
 - encourage coughing and huffing, support position, check for deterioration.
- **Complete / severe choking** (no effective cough, airway obstructed):
 - If conscious, do 5 x back blows, then 5 x abdominal thrusts, repeat continuously;
 - If unconscious / unresponsive, call for help (e.g. 999), start Basic Life Support and CPR unless DNAR documented.

How to help prevent choking on food:

- **Supervision** at mealtimes for assistance / reminders if needed;
- Follow any **swallowing recommendations** from a Speech & Language Therapist;
- Look to check **adequate teeth** for **biting** (front teeth) and **chewing** (back teeth), and that these teeth are present top and bottom and on both sides;
- Ensure any **dentures** are worn;
- Avoid eating & drinking when **short of breath**;
- Avoid eating & drinking when **drowsy**;
- Eat & drink in **quiet room** without conversation or distractions;
- **Sit upright** to eat & drink;
- Eat & drink **slowly**. Some Patients need **reminding to pause** between mouthfuls;
- Take **smaller mouthfuls, one at a time**;
- **Don't cram** or take several mouthfuls quickly before swallowing;

- **Don't talk / discourage talking** while eating food, due to risk of inhaling food;
- Don't have food & drink in the **same mouthful**;
- **Chew well**, even if it takes longer;
- Choose **softer food** that is moist;
- Consider **cutting food up** into smaller pieces;
- **Beware of or avoid eating 'difficult food textures'** (dry, hard, tough, chewy, crispy, crunchy, crumbly, sharp & spiky, stringy, sticky & gummy, floppy, or with pips, seeds, skins, bone, gristle);
- **Beware of meat**, unless very tender and cut into very small pieces or unless it is minced or pureed;
- **Beware of bread** as different types of bread have different textures. Generally bread is considered a regular diet option (IDDSI level 7) due to it's properties (such as turning into a ball in the mouth) and, because of the amount of choking incidents that occur every year on bread;
- Give **Mouth Care** so the mouth is clean and clear at the end of meals;
- Cares offering support should be familiar with **Basic Life Support training**.

Training for staff:

Ahead of time, ensure all staff are trained in what to do when someone is choking.

Read information on the St John's Ambulance website (www.sja.org.uk and search *Adult Choking*).

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Date created: July 2026

Expiry date: July 2029