

# GRAB AND GO LESSON

## Choking Prevention

### Health and Safety

**Purpose:** This handout provides choking prevention strategies for child care settings.

Each year, food-related choking incidents account for over 50% of the fatalities in infants and young children (4 years and below) in the United States. Choking occurs when a foreign object is lodged in the throat or airways, blocking airflow.

Infants and young children are at a higher risk of choking because they have underdeveloped airways. Their airways are not fully able to prevent foods from entering the airway when swallowing. Infants and young children are also at a higher risk because they are learning how to chew and swallow. It is vital to prepare and serve foods in the appropriate sizes, shapes, and textures to reduce choking risks.

### High-Risk Foods and Characteristics

Any food can be a choking hazard. However, some foods pose a higher risk. Some examples include those with the following characteristics:

- Firm, smooth, or slippery foods that may slide down the throat before chewing:
  - Whole grapes, cherries, berries, melon balls, or cherry or grape tomatoes
  - Whole pieces of canned fruit
  - Hot dog-shaped foods, including sausages, meat sticks, cheese sticks, or miniature hot dogs
  - Peanuts, nuts, and seeds
  - Whole beans
  - Hard or round candy, such as jelly beans (not creditable in the CACFP)
- Large or small, dry, or hard foods that are difficult to chew and easy to swallow whole:
  - Popcorn
  - Hard pretzels
  - Chips or other similar snack foods
  - Small pieces of raw vegetables such as raw carrot rounds, baby carrots, string beans, or celery
  - Apples or other hard pieces of fruit, especially those with hard pits or seeds
  - Cooked or raw whole-kernel corn
  - Raw green peas
  - Plain wheat germ
  - Whole grain kernels such as rice and wheat berries
  - Crackers or breads with seeds, nut pieces, or whole grain kernels
- Sticky or tough foods that do not break apart easily:
  - Peanut butter
  - Dried fruits or vegetables
  - Tough or large pieces of meat
  - Large pieces of cheese or string cheese
  - Marshmallows, chewing gum, chewy fruit snacks, caramels, and gumdrops (not creditable in the CACFP)

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#### Make Foods Easier to Chew

Changing the shape, size, or texture of some foods will reduce the risk of choking. Most children four years and younger can eat the same foods as older children as long as it is prepared in a way that is easy to chew and swallow.

For example, cut foods for infants into ¼ inch pieces or smaller and ½ inch or smaller for toddlers. Other examples:

- Cook foods until they are soft enough to pierce easily with a fork.
- Cut soft food into thick slices or small pieces, no larger than ½ inch.
- Cut soft round foods, like hot dogs or string cheese, into short strips rather than round pieces.
- Remove all bones from fish, chicken, and meat before cooking.
- Grind meat or other foods that could be tough.
- Cook foods such as carrots and celery until slightly soft, then cut into sticks.
- Mash or puree food.
- Remove seeds and hard pits from fruit.
- Cut grapes, cherries, berries, or melon balls in half lengthwise, then cut even smaller.
- Grate or thinly slice cheese.
- Chop or grind peanuts, nuts, and seeds.
- Use creamy nut butters instead of chunky nut butters.
- Avoid serving foods that are as wide around as a nickel.

#### Minimize Choking Risk and Increase Safety

During mealtimes, there are several strategies for minimizing the risk of choking in infants and children.

##### Infants

- Ensure infants are developmentally ready for solid foods.
- Make sure the environment is calm.
- Hold infants when serving a bottle; never prop a bottle in an infant's mouth.
- Avoid applying any teething pain-related medicine around mealtimes as they can pose chewing issues.
- Feed infants at their own pace so that they are not fed too quickly.
- Never leave an infant unattended when eating.
- Avoid feeding an infant when they are laughing, crying, walking, or playing.

##### Young Children

- Ensure children are sitting upright when eating and are not distracted.
- Sit with children and actively supervise them while they are eating. A choking child may not make any noise, so adults must keep their eyes on them while they are eating.
- Encourage children to eat slowly.
- Serve foods that are age-appropriate for the children in your care. For example, serve shredded carrots and chopped tomatoes instead of baby carrots and cherry tomatoes.
- Do not allow children to eat while walking or running, or during other active times.
- Do not encourage activities in which a child must catch or stuff food in his or her mouth.

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Taking the proper precautions can greatly reduce the risk of choking. Although any food item can be a choking hazard, these strategies can make mealtime a safe time for children. Do your part by serving age-appropriate foods and supervising children while they are eating. For additional information on choking prevention or first aid for choking situations, refer to the USDA's *Infant Feeding Nutrition Guide*.

### References

- American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. (2019). 4.5.0.10: Foods that Are Choking Hazards. In Chapter 4: Nutrition and Food Service: 4.5 Meal Service, Seating, and Supervision, *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards; guidelines for early care and education programs*. (pp. 192-193). Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.
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