

Choking

Choking occurs when food or another object partially or completely blocks a person's airway. Choking and suffocation are the fourth leading cause of home injury death in the U.S. Older adults are at increased risk of choking due to many factors, including dental problems and appliances and difficulty swallowing due to age-related illness or medicine use. Also, older people who live alone may not be able to get the help they need when they choke.

Common causes of choking in older adults:

- Eating too fast or trying to swallow large pieces of food;
- Walking, talking or laughing with food in the mouth;
- Drinking alcohol before or during meals;
- Wearing dentures; and
- Eating foods that are the wrong texture if you are on a special diet.

Signs that someone could be choking:

- Coughing or gagging;
- Sudden inability to talk;
- Turning blue around the face, lips and fingernail beds;
- Passing out; and
- Clutching at or pointing to the throat.



Choking is an Emergency

Treat every choking instance as an emergency. If you witness someone choking, call 9-1-1 immediately. If you are familiar with life saving techniques, such as abdominal thrusts, use them to try to clear the airway. Do not attempt to drive a choking person to the hospital emergency room yourself unless the 9-1-1 operator instructs you to.

If you are alone and choking, and you can't speak, dial 9-1-1 and leave the phone off the hook. In most communities, emergency personnel automatically respond to 9-1-1 calls in which the caller does not speak. While waiting for the emergency crew to arrive, you can attempt to clear your airway by thrusting your mid-abdomen (the area at the bottom of your ribs) against a chair back or railing.

Even if you are able to dislodge the blockage and restore breathing, follow through with seeking medical attention. Choking is a traumatic event that can damage the airway and make further choking episodes more likely. Medical attention immediately after choking can help prevent this.