



Preventing choking

Keeping your child safe is vitally important to all parents. Babies and small children are at high risk of choking on small items because they examine unfamiliar objects by putting them in their mouths.

Some knowledge of the potential causes of choking in infants and children, taking account of their developmental stage, means that choking can be prevented and managed effectively if it happens.

These parent tips aim to give you the basic information and to direct you to more detailed sources if you would like to find out more.

What is choking?

- Choking happens when your child's airways are blocked and he or she cannot get enough oxygen into their lungs.
- It is very serious and, if it happens, it requires fast and decisive action.
- Babies and children have very small airways and so getting a blockage is relatively easy. Sucking and swallowing, taking solid food and putting objects into the mouth are all normal stages of development, but they also have the potential for choking.
- Babies and children who are unwell can be prone to choking.
- Babies and children who find sucking and swallowing difficult are more likely to start choking than average, and so are those who have a physical condition which may make swallowing difficult.

More information on Page 2

For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was updated on 30/05/2019 and will be reviewed again in 05/2021 and when new evidence becomes available.

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Hazards

- Food which is too lumpy, or food which is just too large a volume for your child's mouth, is the biggest cause of choking. Foods to watch out for are grapes and cherry tomatoes.
- Your child may get distracted during feeding or meal times and so isn't concentrating on eating and swallowing. For example, games at meal times can cause laughter which then causes your child to start to choke.
- As your child explores the world and starts to put objects into her mouth, small foreign bodies from toys or other everyday items can cause choking. It is important to remember that infants can sometimes fit objects into their mouths that they can't remove!
- If you have older children, remember that tiny parts of toys, suitable for a big brother or sister, can be a danger to your baby, as can tiny batteries. These all need to be kept away from babies and supervised play is best at all times.
- Watch out for buttons on clothing, coins and play coins - they are also a source of potential danger.
- Ensure that button batteries are kept away from children as these are a choking hazard but can also cause internal burns if swallowed.

Ten top tips to help keep your child safe

- Be aware of your child's developmental stage and their ability, and always supervise feeding and meal times.
- Plan weaning so that you introduce solid food at the best time for your baby. It is important not to do this too early before your child has developed the skills needed to start to chew and swallow. Your health visitor can advise you on this, and on the best foods to offer.
- Make sure that you give food in sizes and textures which your child can manage safely. Cut food up into small manageable pieces, e.g. the NHS advises that grapes should be cut in half lengthways (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/baby-safety-tips/>). Don't give too many pieces to the child to feed themselves, they may cram too many into their mouth! Avoid very hard foods and avoid nuts. Never let your child throw food up in the air and try to catch it in their mouth.
- Make meal times a special time dedicated to enjoying food. Avoid turning meal times into play times. Always supervise your child carefully and never leave them alone. Meals should be taken seated; eating on the run is dangerous. Time invested early on in setting meal time routines will pay dividends later.
- Go through your child's toys and ask yourself whether they are suitable for her age and developmental ability. Check whether there are small elements of the toy which could become detached, for example the eyes on soft toys and buttons. Toys that are regarded as unsafe for children under 36 months, usually because of the choking risk from small parts, carry a warning symbol on their packaging.
- If toys are broken, discard them.
- Some items are not toys. Children love balloons but these should only ever be decoration and kept out of reach.
- If you have children of various ages and stages, make time for them to play together safely and to play separately with appropriate toys. For instance, marbles are great fun when you are 6, but dangerous to a two year old.
- Check your home. When your child is having fun exploring, are there items which might grab their attention? Look out for:
 - buttons and trimmings on furniture;
 - jewellery that a parent or carer might wear, such as beads, which can be grabbed and stuffed into your baby's mouth;
 - pens with caps left lying around.
- Get down on your hands and knees to be able to notice the objects that might grab your child's attention. Think about visitors to your home, baby sitters and other children.

More information:

Further information on prevention of choking is available on the NHS website:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/baby-safe-tv-tips>

You can learn more about first-aid for babies and children by doing a first-aid course. Ask at your local Children's Centre if there is one, or contact the British Red Cross ([bit.ly/1gtRPme](https://www.britishredcross.org.uk)) or St John Ambulance ([bit.ly/1TG2VvC](https://www.stjohnambulance.org.uk)):

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