

Choking Prevention

Choking occurs when food or another object obstructs the airway and prevents breathing. A partial blockage can cause a coughing fit, but a complete blockage may lead to death if not immediately treated. Prevention is the key.

Common causes of choking in seniors

- Not thoroughly chewing food
- Talking or laughing while eating
- Dry mouth
- Poor dentition or poorly fitting dentures
- Swallowing difficulties, due to conditions like stroke or Parkinson's disease, or caused by alcohol or certain medications

Prevention tips

- Sit upright; do not eat lying down.
- Eat slowly and take small bites.
- Chew food thoroughly before swallowing.
- Do not talk or drink while eating.
- Opt for soft foods, like applesauce and yogurt.
- If your mouth is chronically dry, sip on lemon-flavoured water or suck on a popsicle to stimulate saliva production.
- Beware of the following foods, which may cause choking: steak, chicken and fish bones, hot dogs (remove casing and cut into small pieces before serving), popcorn, hard candies, marshmallows, peanut butter, grapes.
- Pay attention to food size and texture: anything too large, hard, slippery or sticky is potentially dangerous.

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What to do if someone is choking

- If the person can still speak, cough and breathe, do not interfere.
- If the person cannot speak, cough or breathe, perform abdominal thrusts (formerly the Heimlich manoeuvre) to dislodge food blocking the airway.
- Dial 911 immediately.
- Do not give a choking person anything to drink, as fluids may further block the passage of air.
- Never leave the person unattended.

First aid and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training can help you gain the skills to respond to emergency situations. To find a course near you, contact

- **St. John Ambulance** at 1-800-563-9998 or www.sja.ca
- **Canadian Red Cross** at 506-674-6200 or www.redcross.ca/atlantic

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