



Choking Prevention

What is Choking?

Choking happens when a bit of food or drink gets stuck in someone's airway. Choking can be very serious and can even cause death.

Older people and people with disabilities are at much higher risk of choking. This is because people with disabilities may have swallowing problems (known as dysphagia).

"People with swallowing difficulties may overfill their mouths or hold food in their mouths during or after meals. This can pose a risk of choking as food may slip into the throat unexpectedly and block the airway".

Sometimes, well-meaning loved ones and carers give inappropriate food and fluids to people at increased risk of choking, without realising how dangerous this can be.

Why does Choking Happen?

Choking occurs when "food goes down the wrong way" It can happen to anyone. It is sometimes possible to cough it out.

However, some people, because of their disabilities or medication, may easily or frequently choke on food or drink due to problems with chewing and swallowing. Swallowing is difficult for some people who may be unable to control food, drinks, tablets or saliva in their mouth. They may not be aware that they have difficulties, so support is necessary.

People at greatest risk of choking are:

- People with learning disabilities.
- People with strokes, brain damage, brain injuries, brain disorders and brain infections.
- People with dementia.
- People with mental health issues who are on certain medications called psychotropic medications.
- People who have had head and/or neck surgery.

Top tips to prevent choking:

Many cases of choking can be prevented. To prevent choking the following steps may be taken:

- If there are concerns that the person is coughing a lot when they eat and drink or if there has been a change in someone's eating and drinking, make a referral to a Speech and Language therapist for specialist advice and support on eating and drinking.
- Arrange for dental check-ups.
- Work with doctors to change the medication a person is on.
- Train carers (family and friend carers or staff carers depending on where the person lives).
- Put in place a personalised eating and drinking care plan, which may include actions such as, upright sitting position for all eating and drinking or supervised mealtimes.
- Make sure everyone supporting a person with swallowing difficulties is first aid trained to respond in the event of choking incident.
- Make sure there are bespoke care plans for how to respond to a choking incident if the person uses a moulded wheelchair or has postural difficulties that make standard first aid practices difficult

Any SALT recommendations need to be embedded within the care plan alongside a risk assessment to demonstrate how the guidelines must be carried out in practice. Please note that having a DNACPR in place does not prevent intervention in the case of a choking incident.

Care providers should contact emergency services following a choking event because post resolution of the incident a medical assessment should be given. Please note that 999 would not give advice regarding the use of a de-choker / Lifevac. However, if any device has been deployed, please inform the ambulance crew in case it is relevant to any onward care.