

# Choking, Suffocation & Strangulation

Kidsafe SA Inc. | June 2019

Choking, suffocation and strangulation are common causes of unintentional (accidental) injury and death in young children. With choking, suffocation and strangulation, the breathing tubes (airways) become blocked and the child cannot breathe. This results in lack of oxygen to the brain if the airway is blocked.

## Suffocation

A number of household items are potential suffocation hazards for young children. The most obvious are thin plastic bags and plastic wrap. Other less obvious items include pillows, bean bags, balloons, bedding, mattresses, portable cots, disused refrigerators and toy boxes.

## Prevention of Suffocation

- Always tie a knot in the plastic bag before storing it or throwing it away.
- Do not give balloons, particularly uninflated balloons, to young children. Children should be told of the dangers of sucking on plastic film, latex gloves or broken balloon pieces. The plastic can be inhaled and block the child's airway. Foil balloons are safer for young children.
- Many babies have suffocated during their sleep, these deaths are more commonly known as Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI). For information on how to prevent SUDI, please visit our website or download our [factsheet](#).

## Strangulation

Curtain and blind cords are the most common cause of strangulation in young children. This can happen when the cords are too long, or they end in a loop, and when furniture or bedding is too close to windows. Young children playing or sleeping near curtain and blind cords can accidentally become tangled. Once around a child's neck, a cord can quickly tighten and strangle the child.

## Blind & Curtain Cords

- Only buy new curtains and blinds which have warning labels to remind you of dangers to children.
- Make your existing blind and curtain cords safe. Contact the Manufacturer or Kidsafe SA for suggestions.

## Clothing and Jewellery

Young children can be strangled by items of clothing or jewellery. To prevent this happening:

- Choose clothing without ties or ribbons, and avoid crocheted jackets that may pull tight around a baby's neck.
- Always remove a baby's bib before putting them down to sleep.
- Avoid necklaces and other jewellery that can pull around a baby's neck.
- Be aware of cords and strings on clothing e.g. parkas and hooded jumpers than can catch on play equipment or furniture.
- If using a dummy cord, make sure it is no longer than 22cm.

# Choking, Suffocation & Strangulation

## Choking

Most parents have had some sort of near-miss choking incident with their young child. Choking on food or a small object may occur at all ages. However, it is a particular problem for young children 0–4 years due to their small breathing tubes (airways) and the fact that they are still developing their teeth and the ability to chew and swallow.

Young children are most at risk of choking on some foods because their incisor teeth erupt 10 months to 2 years before the second molars (at 20–30 months). Thus there is a period of time that children are able to bite off portions of food without being able to fully grind the food before they swallow it.

The most common types of food that young children choke on are nuts, popcorn, corn chips, whole grapes, hard or sticky lollies, foods that have small and hard pieces (such as raw carrot, celery or apple), foods with tough skin such as sausages and hotdogs, and stringy meats such as chicken and steak.

Young children commonly place small objects into their mouth as a means of exploring the world around them. These can be small items such as buttons, batteries, coins, parts from toys, marbles, pen tops, and other small round objects.

## Prevention of choking

### How to make eating safer for young children

- Always stay with your young child.
- Make sure that your young child sits quietly while eating.
- Never force your young child to eat, as this may cause them to choke.

There is conflict between the importance for children to eat raw, natural and often more healthy foods, and their ability to chew these foods properly. Some useful advice to consider when preparing food for young children is:

- Do not give foods that can break off into small hard pieces.
- Avoid pieces of raw carrot, celery sticks and chunks of apple (for example). These foods can instead be grated, or par boiled so they are slightly softer, or mashed.
- Sausages, frankfurts and other meats with coarse outer skins should be cut into small pieces and the skin/fat removed. Stringy meats such as chicken and steak also need to be cut into small pieces or minced.
- Do not give popcorn, nuts, whole grapes, hard lollies, corn chips or other similar foods to young children.

### How to prevent choking on non-food objects

- As a rule of thumb, any object smaller than a table tennis ball can be a choking hazard and should be kept well out of reach of young children. This can be difficult with older children in the household, but it is important to stress the necessity of keeping older children's toys away from young children. This may mean separate play areas for children of different ages.
- When buying toys it is important to look carefully at them for choking hazards. Toys should have labelling that states what age they are suitable for (for example, suitable for children under three). These labels are not related to the intelligence needed to use the toy, but are an indication of the safety of the product.
- Pen tops have been associated with a number of choking incidents. Look for pens tops with a hole in the top.

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