

factsheet

choking accidents

How many children have choking accidents?

In 1999 accident and emergency units treated nearly 5,000 children aged 15 or under who had been brought to hospital after choking – more than four in five of these accidents happen at home.

The risk of choking declines as children get older - over half of children taken to hospital after choking are under five years old. This is partly because very young children learn about the world around them by reaching for things and putting them in their mouths. Young children also have a narrow airway and have not yet acquired a full set of adult teeth. Babies and young toddlers do not have a fully developed ability to chew, swallow and time these actions with breathing.

About half of all choking accidents in young children involve food - with sweets and fish bones being the most frequent causes.

Although overall the number of choking accidents in children has been declining in recent years the number of cases involving toys has increased over the same period.

How many children die from choking accidents?

Asphyxia (choking, strangulation, suffocation) is the third most common cause of accident death in UK children after road traffic accidents and house fires. In 2000 in England and Wales, 17 children under five and 2 children between five and fifteen died as the result of a choking accident. Eight in ten of these deaths were from choking accidents involving food.

Preventing choking accidents

Food related accidents

Young children should be supervised at mealtimes and not given sweets or any other food while playing reduce the risk of choking on food.

Certain foods can cause particular problems. Reconstituted meat such as hot dogs or burgers can be difficult for young children to swallow. Raw vegetables can also pose a choking risk and should be cut into small strips. Boiled sweets and nuts – particularly peanuts - are also frequent causes of choking and should not be given to very young children.

Accidents have happened when children have choked on toys or other items packaged in food. A European study showed that children up to the age of ten have choked on toys found in food – although ninety per cent of cases involved children under five. Some countries, including the USA and Australia, have now banned the sale of food containing toys or other inedibles.

Choking on toys and other objects

Around eight per cent of choking accidents involve toys or parts of toys. If toys are sold as unsuitable for children under 36 months this means that they have parts that could cause choking in very young children. Toys are tested using a small parts cylinder and toys or parts of toys that can fit entirely inside the cylinder are identified as choking hazards. It is important to give children toys that are appropriate for their age and not to mix toys meant for babies or toddlers with those meant for older brothers or sisters.

Other small objects can also pose a choking risk. Coins are the main non-food cause of choking but batteries and buttons can also be dangerous to babies and very young children and should be kept well out of reach.

Uninflated balloons can also cause choking and should be kept away from very young children. Pieces from burst balloons should be thrown away immediately so that young children cannot pick them up and put them in their mouths.

Children are most at risk of choking when they are tired or crying or when they are running around.

First aid

Knowledge of first aid can save a child's life in the event of a choking accident. Advice on what to do if a baby or young child is choking is available from the following organisations:

British Red Cross
9 Grosvenor Crescent
London SW1X 7EJ
tel 020 7235 5454. web www.redcross.org.uk

Royal Life Saving Society
River House, High Street
Broom
Warwickshire B50 4HN
tel 01789 773994. web www.lifesavers.org.uk

St John Ambulance
27 John's Lane
London EC1M 4BU
tel 08700 10 49 50. web www.sja.org.uk

Further information

The Department of Trade and Industry compiled a report on choking from their home and leisure accident surveillance system. Choking Risks to Children under Four from Toys and other Objects was published in November 1999. It is available free and can be downloaded from www.dti.gov.uk.

For information on other child safety topics see capt's website at www.capt.org.uk or write to us at the address below.

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