



FEEDING AND SWALLOWING PROGRAM FACTSHEET: GAGGING AND CHOKING

When children are learning to chew and learning how to feed themselves, they may try to swallow pieces of food that are too big, and gagging or choking may occur. **Gagging and choking are not the same thing.** Gagging is usually noisy. Choking is usually silent – and very dangerous.

Gagging occasionally on foods is normal in young infants. Gagging is an automatic reaction that pushes objects from the back of the throat to the front of the mouth. Gagging helps to stop objects from blocking the airway, and is usually noisy (i.e. the child will often vocalize, splutter, or cough). Gagging helps to prevent choking. Gagging on food is the infant's way of getting rid of a piece of food that is too big to swallow. Sometimes gagging will also occur if the infant is too full, or if milk is flowing too fast during breastfeeding or bottle feeding.

Choking is not normal during meals and is potentially life threatening. Choking is when food gets stuck in the airway. A child who is choking will struggle to breathe and usually be unable to make any noise with their voice. **If a child looks like they are choking, they need help immediately.**

- **Call 9-1-1 if a child is choking.**

For more information about managing choking or performing CPR see:

Infant under 1: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000048.htm>

Child over 1 or adult: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000049.htm>

General: <http://www.webmd.com/first-aid/choking-treatment>

Note: Information on this website is a general guide only. In an emergency, call 9-1-1 and follow their instructions.

Minimize choking risk:

- Always supervise young children while they are eating.
- Infants need to be in an appropriate baby seat while eating. Older children need to sit down while eating. Slumping over or moving around while eating food increases the risk of choking.
- Avoid distractions while eating, such as watching the TV.
- Avoid access to foods that could block a child's airway:
 - Hard candy
 - Nuts
 - Popcorn
 - Corn chips
 - Chewy pieces of meat
 - Hot dogs (remove the skin and cut them into small pieces)
 - Whole grapes (cut them in half)
 - Raw carrot, apple, celery (grate or cook these foods if offering them)
 - Any hard food that can break off into pieces

For more information, go to: http://www.childrenshospital.org/health-topics/thriving/2010/february-2010/dont-run-with-food-in-your-mouth_-and-other-choking-prevention-tips

Please see our website for additional factsheets – **Feeding and Swallowing Program**

Please note: Factsheets are not intended to replace professional advice

If you have any concerns about your child's feeding and swallowing skills, please discuss this with your child's physician and contact our scheduling office if you wish to arrange a clinical feeding evaluation.

Ph: 617-355-7727 or 781-216-2237

Email: feedingandswallowingscheduling@childrens.harvard.edu