

What you need to know about . . .

Choking and Aspiration

Know the risks

- **Choking** occurs when the airway is obstructed by food, drink, or foreign objects.
- **Aspiration** occurs when food, drink, or foreign objects are breathed into the lungs (going down the wrong tube). It might happen during choking, but aspiration can also be *silent*, meaning that there is no outward sign.

Common issues that increase risk of choking and aspiration:

- A person who has decreased muscle tone or coordination causing difficulty with chewing and swallowing;
- A person who has difficulty holding up their head or sitting up straight, or who cannot position themselves for mealtime;
- A person who eats too quickly or stuffs too much food in their mouth;
- A person who needs any type of help with eating, including verbal prompts and physical assistance;
- A person who has difficulty swallowing food and liquid at certain consistencies;
- A person diagnosed with dysphagia (difficulty swallowing);
- A person who has GERD, cerebral palsy, or a seizure disorder;
- A person who has pica;
- A person with poor oral hygiene, missing teeth, and/or periodontal disease;
- A person taking medications that can affect swallowing;
- A person who has just had anesthesia or sedation for an exam or procedure;
- A person who has a history of choking or aspiration pneumonia;
- A person receiving mealtime support from someone who is not trained to provide their mealtime support.

Know the signs

These are signs that a person may be choking or have aspirated:

- Coughing, gagging, or choking when eating;
- Food falling from the person's mouth;
- Excessive drooling;
- Refusal of food or drink (including when the person will only eat for preferred staff);
- Change in eating patterns;
- Chronic chest congestion, rattling when breathing, or persistent cough;
- Eating or drinking too rapidly or stuffing the mouth;
- Eating or drinking more slowly than usual;
- Eating in a position that is different than usual;
- Throwing head back when swallowing;
- Vomiting after meals;
- Showing signs or symptoms of infection or change in physical status.

Know what to do

Prevention strategies:

- Obtain a swallow study;
- Follow physician's orders, written mealtime support plan, or other written instruction that tell you how to help a person when they are eating;
- Make sure that the person is in the proper position;
- Make sure that food and liquids are prepared to the proper texture and consistency;
- Avoid food and drink right before bedtime;
- Assist the person in staying upright for at least 30 minutes after eating;
- Do not assist someone with mealtime unless you are trained;
- Keep CPR and First Aid Certification up-to-date.

IN AN EMERGENCY:

Call 9-1-1 immediately and begin CPR if the person:

- is having difficulty breathing or stops breathing;
- turns blue;
- loses consciousness (becomes unresponsive);
- reports or indicates feeling very ill.



State of Georgia
Department of Behavioral Health
and Developmental Disabilities

This Choking and Aspiration Fact Sheet is # 1 in a series of Improving Health Outcomes Fact Sheets. It was developed with reference to resources available through the Arizona Division of Developmental Disabilities Quality Assurance Unit and the New York State Office of Persons with Developmental Disabilities. This Fact Sheet is not a substitute for clinical evaluation or physician's orders.