What you need to know about...

Choking and Aspiration

- **Choking** occurs when the airway is blocked 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 factors that increase risk of choking and aspiration occur when a person:

- Has decreased muscle tone or coordination, causing difficulty with chewing and swallowing
- Has difficulty holding up his/her head or sitting up straight, or cannot position himself/herself for mealtime
- Eats too quickly, or stuffs too much food in his/her mouth;
- Needs any type of help with eating, including verbal prompts and physical assistance
- Has difficulty swallowing food and liquid of certain thicknesses
- Has been diagnosed with dysphagia (difficulty swallowing)
- Has GERD (acid reflux), cerebral palsy, or a seizure disorder;
- Has pica (tendency to eat non-food items)
- Has poor oral hygiene, missing teeth, and/or periodontal disease
- Takes medications that can affect swallowing
- Has just had anesthesia or sedation for an exam or procedure
- Has a history of choking or aspiration pneumonia
- Receives mealtime support from someone who is not properly trained to provide it
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 coughing
- Eating or drinking too rapidly or stuffing 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 instructions that tell you how to help a person when he/she is eating
- Make sure that the person is in the proper position
- Make sure that food and liquids are prepared to the proper texture and thickness
- Avoid food and drink right before bedtime
- Help the person stay 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 that he/she feels very ill