

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 risks

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

