

# Safety Article



The Utah Safety Council cares about your safety outside of the work setting. We offer resources that keep you and your loved ones safe at home, at play and on the go.

## AVOIDING EVERYDAY CHOKING HAZARDS AMONG THE ELDERLY

What not to serve at dinner to protect loved ones from foods that can prove dangerous. According to the CDC's most recent data, people aged 65 to 85+ years have a death rate due to choking and suffocation that is eight times higher than any other age group. There is a lot you can do to safeguard your loved ones and avoid this.

When you're planning a menu for family get-togethers that will include elderly folks, consider what Ellen Krasnoff, RRT, says to avoid: steak, hot dogs, popcorn, peanut butter, and several other no-nos.

That's because Krasnoff, an emergency care instructor and registered respiratory therapist who teaches basic, advanced and pediatric cardiac life support and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), has seen firsthand the choking hazards in common foods. Krasnoff, a 44-year veteran in the field, has personally performed the Heimlich maneuver and has performed CPR on many people.

### Why the Elderly Face Greater Choking Risks

Krasnoff asserts that the Heimlich maneuver is a common procedure at elderly healthcare facilities. There are many reasons for this. The elderly may have very dry mouths, either from the saliva drying up due to aging or from certain medications. Krasnoff notes that the elderly very often have a hard candy in their mouth to keep the saliva going. "Without saliva, you can't digest food," she explains.

The trouble is, hard candy itself is a choking hazard. It's preferable for the elderly to have something that liquefies rapidly—such as a popsicle or ice cream, as recommended by their health care professional.

Another problem is that in nursing home or hospital settings, often the elderly are fed too quickly. The nurse assistants don't realize how long it takes them to chew and swallow. In addition, the nursing home may be short-staffed. "They might have one nurse's aide for ten patients," says Krasnoff.

In addition, medical conditions such as strokes make it difficult to swallow, or elders may not chew well because of loose teeth. Some may forgo using their dentures, so they swallow food whole and then choke on it.

### Choking Hazards: Be On the Alert. Common choking hazards to avoid include:

- Water, believe it or not, the fluid is so thin that the elderly choke on it. Nursing homes use thickening agents to make water more viscous.
- Hot dogs, if you must serve them, remove the peel (it's a choking hazard) and julienne into slim pieces.
- Steak or other big pieces of meat.

# Safety Article



The Utah Safety Council cares about your safety outside of the work setting. We offer resources that keep you and your loved ones safe at home, at play and on the go.

- Chicken with bone
- Popcorn and pizza, especially when it's cold. It gets stuck in the airway and is hard to cough or Heimlich out. Never serve popcorn and pizza together.
- Hard candy.
- Bread, especially white bread. When the elderly drink water, the bread expands. It becomes like a big sponge, blocking the airway.
- Cake and milk, for the reasons above.
- Crackers, rice cakes or other dry foods
- White bread and peanut butter. It's like glue, add lots of jelly if you serve peanut butter.
- Large chunks of fruit such as pineapple and apples.

**Foods with Low Choking Risks.** Here are some food choices that are easier to swallow:

- Fish if it's filleted
- Ground meat
- Soups
- Chocolate (if it gets stuck, it melts)
- Applesauce, pudding and gelatin
- Lightly toasted bread with butter or jelly

**Do's and Don'ts of Eating.** These tips will also help reduce incidences of choking:

- Don't drink fluids while you're eating. People do this to make the food go down and it can lead to choking.
- Don't talk while you eat. The epiglottis—the hinge like flap at the base of your tongue that keeps food from entering your windpipe—doesn't know whether to open or close because it doesn't know whether food or air is coming.
- Don't eat lying down.
- Don't drink alcohol while eating.
- Do learn to eat more slowly.
- Do put less on your plate so you can't eat too much too fast. Have a second helping afterward instead.
- Do julienne the food.
- Do peel apples before serving or, better yet, serve applesauce

Being trained in CPR will help you know how to assist someone who is unable to breathe. Enroll in one of our First Aid, CPR and AED courses for more in-depth instruction to make your home a safer place.

*Source: Parentgiving.com*