

This factsheet presents background information mainly for people working with children and families, and students undertaking projects.

More advice on choking prevention can be found in capt's flyer *Put small things where I can't choke on them* written for parents and carers. A sample of this flyer can be downloaded from capt's website www.capt.org.uk, where you can also find out how to purchase bulk supplies.

Child Accident Prevention Trust publishes a range of resources for parents, carers and older children, containing comprehensive safety advice. A complete list of these resources – leaflets, booklets, posters, guides, etc – can be found at www.capt.org.uk together with details of how to obtain them.

How many children have choking accidents?

Each year, over 15,000 children under five and a further 10,000 children aged between 5 and 14 are treated at accident and emergency units after choking.

The risk of choking declines as children get older - over half of children taken to hospital after choking are under five years old. This is partly because very young children learn about the world around them by reaching for things and putting them in their mouths. Young children also have a narrow airway and have not yet acquired a full set of adult teeth. Babies and young toddlers do not have a fully developed ability to chew, swallow and time these actions with breathing.

About half of all choking accidents in young children involve food - with sweets and fish bones being the most frequent causes.

Although overall the number of choking accidents in children has been declining in recent years the number of cases involving toys has increased over the same period.

How many children die from choking accidents?

Asphyxia (choking, strangulation, suffocation) is the third most common cause of accident death in UK children after road traffic accidents and house fires. In 2005 in the UK, 16 children aged under 15 years died as the result of chokings, 12 of them under five (14 in England and Wales and 2 in Scotland).

Preventing choking accidents

Food related accidents

Young children should be supervised at mealtimes and not given sweets or any other food while playing reduce the risk of choking on food.

Certain foods can cause particular problems. Reconstituted meat such as hot dogs or burgers can be difficult for young children to swallow. Raw vegetables can also pose a choking risk and should be cut into small strips. Boiled sweets and nuts – particularly peanuts - are also frequent causes of choking and should not be given to very young children.

Accidents have happened when children have choked on toys or other items packaged in food. A European study showed that children up to the age of ten have choked on toys found in food – although ninety per cent of cases involved children under five. Some countries, including the USA and Australia, have now banned the sale of food containing toys or other inedibles.

Choking on toys and other objects

Around eight per cent of choking accidents involve toys or parts of toys. If toys are sold as unsuitable for children under 36 months this means that they have parts that could cause choking in very young children. Toys are tested using a small parts cylinder and toys or parts of toys that can fit entirely inside the cylinder are identified as choking hazards. It is important to give children toys that are appropriate for their age and not to mix toys meant for babies or toddlers with those meant for older brothers or sisters.

Other small objects can also pose a choking risk. Coins are the main non-food cause of choking but batteries and buttons can also be dangerous to babies and very young children and should be kept well out of reach.

Uninflated balloons can also cause choking and should be kept away from very young children. Pieces from burst balloons should be thrown away immediately so that young children cannot pick them up and put them in their mouths.

Children are most at risk of choking when they are tired or crying or when they are running around..

First aid

Knowledge of first aid can save a child's life in the event of a choking accident. Advice on what to do if a baby or young child is choking is available from the following organisations:

British Red Cross
9 Grosvenor Crescent
London SW1X 7EJ

Tel: 020 7235 5454

www.redcross.org.uk

St John Ambulance
27 St John's Lane
London EC1M 4BU

Tel: 08700 104950

www.sja.org.uk

Royal Life Saving Society
River House
High Street
Broom B50 4HN

Tel: 01789 773994

www.lifesavers.org.uk

St Andrew's
St. Andrew's House
48 Milton Street
Glasgow G4 0HR

Tel: 0141 332 4031

www.firstaid.org.uk

Further information

The Department of Trade and Industry compiled a report on choking from their home and leisure accident surveillance system. Choking Risks to Children under Four from Toys and other Objects was published in November 1999. It is available free and can be downloaded from www.berr.gov.uk/files/file25392.pdf

The statistics used in this factsheet are drawn from a number of sources. The government's Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System that collected information throughout the UK from 1978 was closed down in May 2003. The enquiry service will be maintained for 5 years. Enquiries should be directed to Information Centre, Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Edgbaston Park, 353 Bristol Road, Birmingham B5 7ST, email: infocentre@rospa.com, fax: 0121 248 2001, tel: 0121 248 2066.

Copies of the Annual Reports of the Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System can be downloaded from <http://www.ndad.nationalarchives.gov.uk/CRDA/58/DD/1/detail.html>. The reports for 1998 – 2002 inclusive can be downloaded from <http://www.hassandlass.org.uk/query/reports.htm>. Visit www.hassandlass.org.uk to interrogate the database for 200-2002 yourself.

Factsheets with more detailed information on a variety of accident topics can be found on the Child Accident Prevention Trust website, www.capt.org.uk or can be provided by post on receipt of a stamped address envelope and a list of the subjects you require.

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