

Choking

Choking occurs when a foreign object – such as a mouthful of food, a marble or false teeth – partly or completely blocks a person's airway. Choking may be a life-threatening medical emergency because the brain can only survive a few minutes without oxygen. Another name for choking is foreign body airway obstruction.

First aid can save the life of a choking person if applied correctly and immediately. Procedures are different for adults and children. Always call triple zero (000) in an emergency.

The suggestions in this fact sheet are **not** a substitute for first aid training. Everyone should learn first aid skills. See the **Where to get help** section of this fact sheet for organisations that offer first aid courses.

Signs and symptoms of choking – partly blocked airway

A person with a partly blocked airway can still breathe, speak or cough. Symptoms include:

- Panicked and distressed behaviour
- Inability to talk in complete sentences or at full volume
- Frantic coughing
- Unusual breathing sounds, such as wheezing or whistling
- Clutching at the throat
- Watery eyes
- Red face.

Signs and symptoms of choking – completely blocked airway

A person with a completely blocked airway cannot breathe, speak or cough at all. Symptoms include:

- Panicked and distressed behaviour, including vigorous attempts to breathe
- Clutching at the throat
- Watery eyes
- Red face at first, turning pale and then blue due to lack of oxygen (cyanosis)
- Unconsciousness and collapse.

First aid for choking – if the person is conscious

To begin with:

- Reassure the person.
- Encourage them to breathe and cough.

If coughing does not remove the blockage or if the casualty is a baby:

- Call triple zero (000).
- Give 5 back blows – checking if obstruction is relieved after each blow.
- If unsuccessful, give 5 back thrusts – checking if obstruction is relieved after each thrust.

The technique for adults and children is different to that required for babies:

- **Adult or child** – ask the person to lean over with their hands on their knees or sit in a chair leaning forward. The amount of force used on a child is less than that on an adult.
- **Baby** – place the child on your lap or forearm, with their head lower than their body, but ensure that you have a firm hold of them. The amount of force is less than that used on a child.

First aid for choking – if the person is unconscious

If the person becomes unconscious:

- Call triple zero (000).
- Remove any visible obstruction from the mouth.
- Commence cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)

First aid procedure includes:

- Place the person on their back on a hard surface such as the floor (place a baby on a table).
- Tilt the person's head gently back, pinch the nostrils closed, cover their mouth with yours to create a seal and blow firmly. (Do not tilt a baby's head back. Instead, cover their nostrils and mouth. Blow in puffs.)
- Place the heel of one hand on the lower half of the person's breastbone. Place the other hand on top of the first hand and interlock your fingers. Keep your fingers up so that only the heel of your hand is on the person's chest.
- Press down firmly and smoothly (compressing to one-third of chest depth) 30 times. Then administer 2 breaths. Repeat at the rhythm of 5 cycles in 2 minutes.
- Continue CPR and only stop when the ambulance officers take over or the person recovers.

First aid for yourself

If you are choking:

- Try to stay calm. Attract someone's attention for help.
- Attempt forceful coughing. Lean as far forward as you can. Hold onto something that is firmly anchored, if possible. Breathe out and then take a deep breath in and cough. This may eject the foreign object.
- Don't let anyone slap you on the back while you are upright. Gravity may cause the object to slip further down your trachea (windpipe).

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of the nearest hospital

For first aid training, contact:

- St John Ambulance Australia Victoria Tel. 1300 360 455
- Australian Red Cross Tel. 1300 367 428

Things to remember

- Always call triple zero (000) for an ambulance in an emergency.
- Don't slap a choking person on the back while they are upright – gravity may cause the object to slip further down the trachea (windpipe).

- First aid for choking adults includes back blows and chest thrusts while the person is leaning forward.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

St John Ambulance

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