



Prevention of Choking and Aspiration

The Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) recognizes that individuals with developmental disabilities present a high risk for dysphagia (difficulty swallowing) which can lead to both choking and aspiration. **This course reviews preventative measures to decrease the risk of choking and aspiration.**

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

In this course, you will review the following:

- Definitions of choking and aspiration
- Common issues that people with developmental disabilities face when eating or drinking
- Identification and reduction of hazards through observation of the person and their environment
- Interventions to reduce the risk of choking and aspiration
- Appropriate first aid responses to an incident

DEFINITIONS

CHOKING is the blocking of the airway by foods, liquids or foreign objects.

ASPIRATION is the inhaling of foods, liquids or foreign objects into the lungs. This is also known as “going down the wrong pipe”.

COMMON ISSUES - 1 of 3

For people with developmental disabilities, common issues exist that place a person at risk for Choking and Aspiration:

- The person has decreased muscle coordination and/or tone which is causing problems with their chewing or swallowing
- The person has difficulty holding their head up or sitting up straight
- The person has impaired mobility, which leaves them unable to properly position themselves for adequate swallowing

COMMON ISSUES - 2 of 3

- The person has been diagnosed with Gastroesophageal reflux disease, commonly referred to as GERD or acid reflux
- The person has dental concerns or problems
- The person takes medications that affect the muscles of the throat or mouth and cause delayed swallowing

COMMON ISSUES - 3 of 3

- The person has poor self-eating skills and is prone to food stuffing or rapid eating
- The person has difficulty swallowing anything with inappropriate fluid or food inconsistencies
- The person is assigned a staff team member who has not been trained in supporting people with their eating/drinking

PREVENTION IS CRITICAL

- Some incidents are completely preventable
- Mealtime can be pleasurable for some and a difficult time for others
- If we identify problems and develop interventions early, we can ensure the health and safety of individuals and make eating and drinking a pleasant experience

YOUR CHALLENGE!

- The greatest error made by most treatment teams is failing to identify the source of the real eating/drinking problems
- Treatment Teams should routinely consider a wide range of potential causes
- Intervention and prevention strategies should be identified and noted in the ISP, CFA, any risk assessments and Dining Plans

How a person eats should be discussed during the Interdisciplinary Service Planning session, and, if risks are present, a good plan of prevention should be discussed, written down, and shared with all staff that support the individual including day program staff.

OBSERVATION

Observation is the greatest incident prevention tool you have. When helping an individual eat or drink make sure your attention and focus stays on the individual.

What to Observe

- Does someone else put food or fluid into this person's mouth?
- Does this person cough or choke during or after finishing their food or beverage?
- Does food fall (or fluid drool) out of this person's mouth?

Does this person regularly refuse liquids? Answer "YES" if, for example, they will not drink for certain staff or if they like drinks that are only thick or only thin

Does this person regularly refuse food? Answer "YES" if, for example, they will not eat for certain staff or if they do not like certain consistencies

**IMPORTANT: IF AN INDIVIDUAL'S EATING OR DRINKING PATTERN CHANGES
PLEASE NOTIFY THE NURSE OR SUPERVISOR IMMEDIATELY**

OBSERVATION

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- Does this person have a medical condition such as cerebral palsy, acid reflux, difficulty swallowing or hiatal hernia?

- Does this person have chronic chest congestion, frequent pneumonia, rattling when breathing, persistent cough or does this person chronically use cough or asthma medication?
- Does this person complain of chest pain or heart burn or have small, frequent vomiting (especially after meals) or frequent or wet burping?
- Does this person eat or drink too rapidly or stuff food into their mouth that may cause choking?

OBSERVATION

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- Does this person have extreme food seeking or liquid seeking behavior that may cause injury to them?
- Does this person engage in pica behavior?
- *(Some persons with developmental disabilities have a condition called pica that causes them to eat non-edible items such as rubber gloves, batteries, cigarette butts, or paper. It is very important to pay close attention to the environment of the home if there is an individual with pica living there.)*

Interventions are methods to help reduce the risk of choking and aspiration

- Know the individuals written Dining Plan
- Prepare the appropriate food texture and liquid consistency per physician's order
- Only trained staff are to assist with eating
- If there are swallowing difficulties consult with a nurse or supervisor immediately
- Carefully stop the individual from eating if the person coughs, chokes or gags
- Call for help and apply first aid, if needed, to ensure the safety of the individual

INTERVENTIONS

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- Maintain a slow pace of eating and decrease the size of bites
- Be sure individual is seated for meals and snacks in proper sitting position to encourage safe swallowing
- Do not engage in power struggles with persons that have behavioral issues when eating
- Maintain a calm environment while eating and drinking

SUPERVISION

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- Supervision is critical for choking prevention
- Supervise all individuals when they are eating and/or drinking at meals, snack time, medication administration, in program or in the community:
MOVIES • PICNICS • BALL GAMES • RESTAURANTS

TRAINING PROTOCOLS

- Staff should be trained in prescribed food and liquid consistencies
- If there is any possibility a person is choking, do not wait, call 911 or activate the Emergency
- Medical Services (EMS) and assist the individual immediately by applying choking interventions per your First Aid training
- If a person is assigned to one-to-one staffing, staff must follow the one-to-one protocol
- Staff should be trained in the Dining Plan for each individual they support



UNIVERSAL SIGN FOR CHOKING

- Call for Help
- Use your first aid training
- Seek medical treatment

Course Review Questions: Your training is nearly complete, however, to ensure you take away the most important points you will now test your knowledge with review questions.

Indicate the correct answer(s) to the following questions, sign, and turn in your answer sheet

1. If there is any possibility a person is choking:
 - Call 911 or activate EMS
 - Assist the individual immediately
 - Wait for the individuals to ask for help
 - Both A & B are correct
 - None of the above
2. Walking around while eating increase the risk of choking
 - TRUE
 - FALSE
3. Any time a person with a developmental disability is eating, you should (circle all that apply):
 - Leave the room if they ask for privacy
 - Be sure they are seated while eating
 - Allow them the freedom to eat how they wish
 - Ensure that their food is cut up properly
 - Encourage them to eat slowly
4. If a person's eating or drinking pattern changes you should do the following:
 - Cut their food into smaller pieces
 - Offer the person additional fluids
 - Notify the nurse or supervisor immediately
 - Spoon feed the person to complete the meal

Instructor Name: _____

Employee Name: _____

Employee Signature: _____ Date: _____