

# Choking & suffocation



The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008

Choking and suffocation are major risks for babies and toddlers for a number of reasons. From only a few months of age, infants put objects in their mouths – this is one of the ways they learn about things. Young children are naturally curious and will always be exploring their environment – they will look and touch, tug and experiment. Young children's airways are small and easily blocked, their reflexes are not well developed and their bodies are not strong, so they are less likely to be able to get themselves out of trouble.

There are a number of areas in and around the house that present a choking and suffocation risk to infants and young children.

## Food

Certain foods can be dangerous for young children because they can easily be inhaled and block off the breathing tubes. These include nuts, raw carrots and other hard vegetables, pieces of apple, popcorn, corn chips, lollies and grapes. Remember that young children under the age of three years may not be able to chew properly because they do not yet have their full complement of teeth, so anything that is firm is a potential hazard.

- Never give nuts to children under five years of age.
- Carrots and other hard fruit and vegetables should be cooked, mashed or grated.
- At eating times stay with young children and make sure they sit quietly while eating or drinking.
- Meat should be cooked and cut into small pieces.
- Never force young children to eat, as this may cause them to choke.
- Nurse your baby while he/she drinks from a bottle.
- A baby should not be left alone with a bottle.

## Toys

Any object that is small enough to fit into a film canister can choke a child less than three years of age.

Avoid selecting toys that have small parts as it is likely that at some stage they will find their way into the mouth of a young child where it can easily be inhaled and cause choking. Remember also that some less sturdy toys can break easily into small bits that can be dangerous. Choose age-appropriate toys that are sturdy and well made.

When outdoors make sure that young children do not have unsupervised access to rope swings as these can present a strangulation hazard.

## Curtain and blind cords

Young children can get caught in dangling curtain cords, as well as in ropes and straps and cords attached to dummies. Fit blinds and curtains with rods instead of cords.

Where there are cords, wrap them around a cleat (available from hardware stores) attached to the wall near the top of the curtain or blind. The length of any cord should not be longer than 30cm and be well off the floor and out of reach of curious toddlers.

- Do not attach cords or string to dummies.
- Keep cots away from blind and curtain cords.
- Keep mobiles out of reach of infants.

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## Plastics

Plastic bags, dry cleaning bags and plastic wrap are especially dangerous for young children. A child can easily suffocate if they pull them over their heads.

- Always tie a knot in dry cleaning and plastic bags before throwing them out.
- Plastic bags should be stored out of reach.
- Plastic covers on mattresses should always be removed and discarded before use – these are not a substitute for waterproof mattress protectors.
- Do not give uninflated balloons to young children (long strings on balloons are also dangerous).

## Pillows and mattresses

These are another potential hazard for suffocation in young children.

- Pillows and cot bumper pads should not be used for children under two years of age.
- Choose a firm, close fitting mattress and avoid putting infants and young children to sleep on soft surfaces such as beanbags and waterbeds.
- Infants should not be put to sleep on sofas or in adult beds.

## Prams

Do not use the pram as a 'sleeping container' for periods when the infant is unsupervised.

## Clothing

- When choosing clothing avoid ties, ribbons or crocheted jackets that may pull tight.
- Always remove a baby's bib before putting them down to sleep.
- Avoid necklaces and other jewellery that can get caught.
- Be aware of cords and drawstrings on clothing such as parkas and hooded windcheaters as they can catch on play equipment.

## Small articles

Anything that fits into a film canister is a choking hazard for young children under three years of age. Make sure that young children cannot reach or play with:

- needles, pins and safety pins.
- coins and small disc batteries.
- buttons, beads, marbles, the tops of ballpoint pens and polystyrene beads which are found in stuffed toys and bean bags and easily inhaled.
- watermelon seeds, dried peas, toys with small parts that can be removed or disassembled.

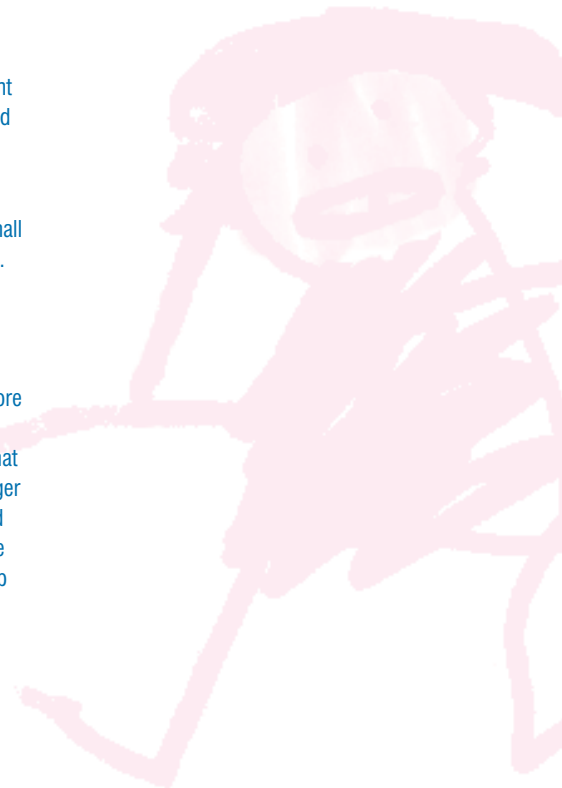
## Disused refrigerators and toy boxes

The law requires fridge doors be removed before disposal in a tip (or on the nature strip outside the house waiting for collection). Make sure that this is done at home too if the fridge is no longer in use. Children love playing hiding games and storage boxes are a favourite place. Make sure that a heavy lid or one that catches cannot trap the child inside – it would be safer to remove the lid.

## First aid for choking and suffocation

Anyone caring for young children should take a course in children's first aid. The Safety Centre facilitates courses, as do St. John Ambulance Association, Australian Red Cross Society, the Royal Life Saving Society and the National Heart Foundation. Local branches of these organisations can be found in the telephone directory.

A first aid manual should always be kept close by, along with a first aid kit. Books and kits are available from the shops at The Royal Children's Hospital.



For further information  
about the Safety Centre  
Telephone 9345 5085

[www.rch.org.au/safetycentre](http://www.rch.org.au/safetycentre)

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