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Kia ora koutou katoa

Preventing infant and toddler choking in our early learning services

Nothing is more important than the safety and well-being of our children, and so it is essential that parents and caregivers have confidence that their children are learning in a safe, well-run, early learning service.

It is well known that young children can choke on food quite easily. This is because they have small air and food passages, are still learning to move food around in their mouths, and their biting, chewing, and food-grinding skills are still developing.

We would like to remind you of the Ministry of Health's recommendations to always ensure that:

- babies and young children sit down while they eat;
- someone is with them while they are eating or drink; and
- all staff know how to provide choking first aid and CPR.

The Ministry of Health's guidance on food related choking in young children outlines the risk of certain foods and the way these foods can be prepared and consumed by infants and toddlers. In some cases, removing food items is necessary and there are steps that can be taken to make high-risk food safer for young children. Changing the texture, removing skins, grating, cooking, or mashing are some ways of making food safer that presents a risk when swallowing. This information can be found at <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/food-activity-and-sleep/healthy-eating/food-related-choking-young-children> and is attached for your reference. We ask that you read the guidance and share this with your staff, parent and whānau communities so that they are aware of the risks, how they can prevent choking, and how they can apply first-aid.

We have also provided in the attached, links to Ministry of Health technical papers and health education resources, and the *HealthEd* website that covers choking first aid and CPR.

The Ministry of Education is also considering its licensing criteria for early learning services and certification for playgroups to minimise or eliminate the risk of children choking on food.

You will hear more about this in the near future.

In the meantime, we thank you for your attention to this message.

Nā Māua



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Secretary for Education



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Foods that pose a higher choking risk for children under five years

Children can choke on food at any age, but those under five are at higher risk – and especially children under three.

The shapes and textures of some foods means they're more likely to cause choking. The kinds of foods more commonly associated with choking incidents are described below, along with ways of reducing the risks.

Small hard foods

These are foods which are difficult for children to bite through and break down enough to swallow safely – pieces can become stuck in children's airways.

Examples of these are:

- nuts
- large seeds (eg, pumpkin and sunflower seeds)
- hard dried fruit
- pieces of raw carrot, celery or apple
- foods that break into hard sharp pieces (eg, crisps, corn chips, rice crackers)
- unpopped popcorn husks.

To reduce the risk of choking:

- avoid giving whole nuts, large seeds or hard dried fruit to children under the age of five
- use thinly spread smooth peanut butter instead of whole or chopped nuts
- carrot, apple and celery can either be cooked until soft or finely grated.

Small round or oval foods

Foods like this can lodge in children's airways. Examples are:

- grapes, berries and cherry tomatoes
- raisins and sultanas
- fruit with stones and large seeds or pips (eg, watermelon, small stone fruits)
- peas
- lollies/sweets.

To reduce the risk of choking:

- grapes, berries and cherry tomatoes can be quartered or chopped smaller
- soak raisins and sultanas to soften, and cut in half if large
- remove stones from fruits
- peas can be squashed with a fork.

Young children don't have the ability to chew small round hard, chewy or sticky lollies/sweets. These shouldn't be given to children under the age of three.

Foods with skins or leaves

Food skins are difficult to chew and can completely seal children's airways.

Examples are:

- chicken, sausages, saveloys, cheerios, frankfurters, etc
- stone fruits (eg, plums, peaches, nectarines)
- apples and pears
- tomatoes
- lettuce and other raw salad leaves
- spinach and cabbage.
- To reduce the risk of choking:
- remove or peel skins before serving
- chop up (to at least as small as the child's small fingernail) and add to mashed food
- remove stones from fruit
- finely chop salad leaves
- cook spinach and cabbage until soft and chop finely.

Compressible foods

These are foods that can squash into the shape of a child's throat and get stuck there.

Examples are:

- sausages, saveloys, cheerios, frankfurters, hot dogs, etc
- pieces of cooked meat
- marshmallows
- popcorn
- chewing or bubble gum.

To reduce the risk of choking:

- chop up (to at least as small as the child's small fingernail) and add to mashed food
- as above– remove skins before serving
- cook meat until very tender, chop finely and add to mashed food
- marshmallows and popcorn should not be given to children under three
- don't give chewing or bubble gum.

Thick pastes

Foods like this can form to the shape of a child's airway and stick to its side.

Examples are:

- chocolate spreads
- peanut butter.

To reduce the risk of choking:

- use thick pastes sparingly and spread evenly onto bread.

Fibrous or stringy foods

The fibres in this sort of food can make it hard for children to break the food up into smaller pieces.

Examples are:

- celery
- rhubarb
- raw pineapple.

To reduce the risk of choking:

- peel the skin/strong fibres off celery and rhubarb
- slice these foods thinly across the grain of fibres.

Further information for your reference:

Technical documents

These documents provide the Ministry of Health's recommendations to avoid food related choking in young children as well as relevant background information, and the rationale for the advice:

- Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Infants and Toddlers (aged 0-2yrs): A background paper (MoH 2008/limited update 2012)

<https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/food-and-nutrition-guidelines-healthy-infants-and-toddlers-aged-0-2-background-paper-partially>

- Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children and Young People (aged 2-18 yrs): A background paper (MoH 2012)

<https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/food-and-nutrition-guidelines-healthy-children-and-young-people-aged-2-18-years-background-paper>

Health education resources

These include the Ministry of Health's key recommendations. Hard copies can also be ordered at the healthed.govt website:

<https://www.healthed.govt.nz/resource/eating-healthy-babies-and-toddlersng%c4%81-kait%c5%8dtika-m%c5%8d-te-hunga-k%c5%8dhungahunga>

<https://www.healthed.govt.nz/resource/eating-healthy-children-aged-2-12ng%c4%81-kait%c5%8dtika-m%c5%8d-te-hunga-k%c5%8dhungahunga>

HealthEd website (Well Child Tamariki Ora Health Book)

Hard copies can also be ordered at the healthed.govt website:

<https://www.healthed.govt.nz/resource/well-child-tamariki-ora-my-health-book#How to use this book>