Choking Hazards for Children

The Consumer Product Safety Commission regulates toys sold in the United States. The toys sold here must meet certain standards (i.e., low levels of lead in paint; no sharp edges/points). Toys for ages three and under must not have any small parts that could come off and allow a child to choke, eat, or inhale. Also watch for strings/cords that could wrap around a child’s neck. To check on recalls, call CPSC at 1-800-638-2772.

Now, when it comes to food, that is another matter. Food is the number one choking hazard among young children. The Food and Drug Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture work to help assure that our food supply is safe, but parents have to stay watchful to make sure that the food they feed their children do not pose a choking hazard.

Children (as well as adults) are susceptible to choking. Those under age five are particularly at risk because they have fewer and smaller teeth, weaker chewing ability, and narrower airways. The back teeth (molars) are used for grinding and mashing food but don’t appear until 12-18 months, and it may take another two years until the child is good at chewing properly. Those children ages three and younger are more likely to put anything and everything in their mouths (often non-food items such as coins, buttons, marbles, and deflated balloons, even inflated balloons, which if bitten can pop and send pieces down the throat). Candy and gum are probably at the top of the list of foods, but foods of all shapes and sizes can cause choking, even healthy fruits and vegetables. The following list are foods to watch out for:

- **Round, small, slippery**—baby carrots, grapes, and raisins can slip right down the throat and lodge in a narrow spot.

- **Firm but pliable foods**—hot dogs, sausages, and frozen banana pieces can conform to the shape of the throat and lodge there.

- **Light, dry foods**—popcorn, tortilla/potato chips, and pretzels can all get stuck in the throat as well as hard, fresh produce like apples and carrots.

- **Chewy, sticky foods**—caramels, gum, gummy bears, fruit leathers, peanut butter, and cheese slices/cubes.

- **Stringy foods**—celery and spaghetti may also be hard for some younger ones to manage.

- **If a food is hard to chew**—steak and bagels may be too tough to chew and children may try to swallow pieces whole. Chicken, pork and other meats with bones (fish, too) are also dangerous.

- **Some medications**—including those for teething pain can numb the mouth and throat muscles.

**What Should A Parent Do?**

A child is more likely to choke if eating while running around. So, be a good role model and don’t let your children see you walking around the house with food.

Establish a predictable mealtime routine. Let them know that they are expected to sit down to eat with no distractions (TV).

Tell them that their meal is over when they leave the table. Take away their plate, but offer them a healthy snack later if they are hungry.

Be consistent. Insist snacks are also eaten when sitting down.

Never leave a child unattended with food.

Praise children when they show good behavior.

For more information, contact Betsy Crisp, MS, LD
UF/IFAS-Pasco County Extension
36702 State Road 52
Dade City, FL 33525-5198.