

# Prevent Choking on Food in Children Under 4

Children **younger than 4 years old** are more likely to choke on food while eating. Young children are learning to chew, may not have their back teeth (molars) yet, and they may swallow their food whole. Their small airways can easily become blocked with food. Read on for tips to help prevent choking.

## Choking is not the same as gagging

### Choking:

happens when a piece of food blocks the flow of air, making it hard to breathe. It can be life threatening.

### Gagging:

helps protect the airway by pushing food forward when it feels too big, too far back in the mouth, or unfamiliar. It's a reflex that is common for babies and young children learning to eat solid foods.

## Tips to help prevent choking in young children

- Have children sit down to eat and remove distractions.
- Watch children while they eat meals and snacks.
- Offer foods that match a child's ability to chew and swallow.

## Change the texture, size, or shape of foods to prevent choking

Foods that are **hard, small, round, sticky, stringy, or chewy** are more likely to cause choking in young children.



Round, smooth foods like whole grapes, cherries, and small tomatoes.



Remove pits and hard seeds. Cut into small pieces.



Raw, hard vegetables and fruits.



Finely grate, cut into narrow strips, or cook until soft.



Long pastas like spaghetti or fettucine.



Cut into small pieces or choose a smaller shape.



Stringy or chewy foods like meat, pineapple, or celery.



Cut it into small pieces. Cook meat until soft.



Foods that stick to the roof of the mouth like nut and seed butters.



Spread thinly on toast or crackers, or mix into baby cereal or yogurt.



Tube-shaped foods like sausages, meat sticks, hot dogs, chunks of cheese, or string cheese.



Slice from end to end. Then cut into short strips or pieces.



## Avoid these foods until children are 4 years of age

These foods cannot be changed to make them safer for young children.



Popcorn



Whole nuts, seeds, and dried fruits



Hard or sticky candy



Pretzels and chips



Marshmallows



Chewing gum



Fish with bones



Foods with toothpicks or skewers

## For more support



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](#) on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit [ahs.ca/Nutrition](https://www.ahs.ca/Nutrition).
- Visit [Myhealth.Alberta.ca](https://myhealth.alberta.ca) and search [choke](#).
- Visit [Peas.ahs.ca](https://peas.ahs.ca) and search [Gagging in Babies and Children](#).
- Visit [Healthyparentshealthychildren.ca](https://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca).

