

# Avoiding Choking Hazards in the Elderly

What not to serve at dinner to elderly from foods that can prove dangerous.  
By Deborah Quilter

According to the CDC's most recent data, there were 463 choking deaths related to food among people aged 65 to 85+ years old in 2006. There is a lot that can be done to safeguard the elderly and avoid this.

When planning a menu, consider avoiding steak, hot dogs, popcorn, peanut butter, and several other no-nos.

## Why the Elderly Face Greater Choking Risks

The elderly are very dry, either from the saliva drying up due to aging or from certain medications. The elderly very often have a hard candy in their mouth to keep the saliva going. "Without saliva, you can't digest food."

The trouble is hard candy itself is a choking hazard. It's preferable for the elderly to have something that liquefies rapidly – such as a Popsicle or ice cream, if allowed in their diet.

Often the elderly are fed too quickly. People feeding them don't realize how long it takes them to chew and swallow. In addition, medical conditions such as strokes make it difficult to swallow, or elders may not chew well because of loose teeth. Some may forgo using their dentures, so they swallow food whole and choke on it.

## Choking Hazards: Be on the Alert

Common choking hazards to avoid include:

- Water. Believe it or not, the fluid is so thin that the elderly choke on it. Ask your healthcare professional about using thickening agents to make water more viscous.
- Hot dogs. If you must serve them, remove the peel (it's a choking hazard) and julienne into slim pieces.
- Steak or other big pieces of meat.
- Chicken with bones.
- Popcorn.
- Pizza, especially when it's cold.
- Hard candy.
- Bread, especially white bread. When the elderly drink water, the bread expands and can become like a big sponge, blocking the airway.

- Cake and milk, for the reasons above.
- Crackers, rice cakes or other dry foods.
- White bread and peanut butter. This can be like glue. It's best to add lots of jelly if you serve peanut butter.
- Large chunks of fruit, such as pineapple and apples.

### **Better Choices: Foods with Low Choking Risks**

Here are some food choices that are easier to swallow:

- Fish, if it's filleted.
- Ground meat.
- Soups.
- Chocolate (if it gets stuck, it melts).
- Applesauce, pudding and Jell-o.
- Lightly toasted bread with butter or jelly.

### **Do's and Don'ts of Eating**

These tips will also help reduce incidences of choking:

- Don't drink fluids while eating. People do this to make the food go down and it can lead to choking.
- Don't talk while eating. The epiglottis – the hinge like flap at the base of your tongue that keeps food from entering your windpipe – doesn't know whether to open or close because it doesn't know whether food or air is coming.
- Don't eat lying down.
- Don't drink alcohol while eating.
- Do learn to eat more slowly.
- Do put less on your plate so you can't eat too much too fast. Have a second helping afterward instead.
- Do julienne the food.
- Do peel apples before serving or, better yet, serve applesauce.

Adapted with permission from "Avoiding Everyday Choking Hazards." Retrieved from <http://www.parentgiving.com/>. October 2013.