

# **Reducing food-related choking for babies and young children at early learning services**

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Recommendations	1
How to alter high-risk food to lower its choking risk	3
<b>Background information and references</b>	<b>6</b>



# Introduction

Babies and young children have an increased risk of choking on food. This is because they have small air and food passages. They are also learning to move food around in their mouths and learning how to bite, chew and grind food. It takes some years for children to master these skills and many don't truly master chewing until four years of age.<sup>1</sup>

This advice is based on the Ministry of Health's recommendations [www.health.govt.nz/food-related-choking](http://www.health.govt.nz/food-related-choking), but has been adapted for licensed early learning services such as early childhood education services, ngā kōhanga reo and certificated playgroups. The original advice is for parents and caregivers who have a good awareness of a child's stage of development, and who can closely supervise a child. This close relationship and degree of supervision is not often possible in early learning services, so the advice here is more prescriptive to manage the risk involved.

## Recommendations

While it is not possible to remove all risk, it can be reduced by following the recommendations based on these three areas:

1. a safe physical environment when eating
2. first aid
3. providing appropriate food.

### 1. A safe physical environment when eating

Take the following actions to provide a safe physical environment for babies and children while they are eating:

- Supervise babies and children when they are eating.
- Have an appropriate ratio of adults to children at mealtimes.
- Minimise distractions and encourage children to focus on eating.
- Ensure there is a designated time where children sit down to eat, rather than continuous grazing.
- Ask children not to talk with their mouths full.
- Have children sit up straight when they are eating. Sitting down and maintaining good posture are essential for safe eating and drinking. Do not allow walking, running or playing while children are eating.
- Place food directly in front of the child. This helps to prevent them twisting around to the left or right, which can cause them to lose control of the food in their mouth.

<sup>1</sup> The ages in this advice are based on the expected range of development in small children. If a child has a developmental delay, suspected or diagnosed, discuss food requirements with the child's parents or caregivers.



# How to alter high-risk food to lower its choking risk

Food characteristics	Examples	Choking risk	Changes to reduce risk	
			1–3 years old	4–6 years old
<b>Small hard food</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pieces of raw carrot, apple or celery</li> </ul>	Difficult for young children to bite through and break down enough to swallow safely. Pieces can become stuck in children's airways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grate raw carrot, apple or celery; <b>or</b></li> <li>Spiralise to create vegetable or fruit spirals; <b>or</b></li> <li>Slice thinly using a mandolin or vegetable peeler; <b>or</b></li> <li>Cook until soft<sup>2</sup> and cut into strips (around 4–6 cm long) that can be picked up with one hand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepare as for 1–3 years.</li> <li>Cut raw vegetables or fruit into sticks (approximately 4–6 cm long) that can be picked up with one hand.</li> </ul>
<b>Small round or oval food</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fruit with stones like peaches and plums</li> <li>Fruit with large seeds or large pips like watermelon and papaya</li> <li>Small round foods like grapes, berries, cherry tomatoes</li> </ul>	Small round foods can lodge in children's airways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remove the stone and chop to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller (about half the width of a standard dinner fork).</li> <li>Remove large seeds or large pips.</li> <li>Quarter or finely chop grapes, large berries and cherry tomatoes to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cut into sticks (around 4–6 cm long) that can be picked up with one hand.</li> <li>Halve or quarter grapes, large berries and cherry tomatoes.</li> <li>Whole cooked green peas are acceptable.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> 'Soft' means the food can be easily squashed between your thumb and forefinger, or on the roof of your mouth with your tongue.

Food characteristics	Examples	Choking risk	Changes to reduce risk	
			1–3 years old	4–6 years old
<b>Small round or oval food</b> <i>continued</i>	and raw green peas.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cook raw and frozen green peas and squash with a fork.</li> </ul>	
<b>Fruit with skin</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peaches</li> <li>• Plums</li> <li>• Nectarines</li> <li>• Apples</li> <li>• Pears</li> <li>• Tomatoes</li> </ul>	Fruit skins are difficult to chew and can completely seal children's airways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove the stone and chop to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller (about half the width of a standard dinner fork).</li> <li>• Grate raw apple or pear, <b>or</b> slice thinly using a mandolin or vegetable peeler.</li> <li>• Alternatively, cook until soft<sup>3</sup> and cut into strips (around 4–6 cm long) that can be picked up with one hand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare as for 1–3 years.</li> <li>• Cut raw fruit into sticks (around 4–6 cm long) that can be picked up with one hand.</li> <li>• Finely chop tomato to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller.</li> </ul>
<b>Food with skin or leaves</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chicken</li> <li>• Lettuce and other raw salad leaves</li> <li>• Spinach</li> <li>• Cabbage</li> </ul>	Food skins and leaves are difficult to chew and can completely seal children's airways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove skin from chicken.</li> <li>• Finely slice or chop salad leaves, lettuce, spinach and cabbage.</li> </ul>	

<sup>3</sup> 'Soft' means the food can be easily squashed between your thumb and forefinger, or on the roof of your mouth with your tongue. Tinned fruit (in natural juice and drained) is acceptable.



Food characteristics	Examples	Choking risk	Changes to reduce risk	
			1–3 years old	4–6 years old
<b>Compressible foods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pieces of cooked meat</li> </ul>	Can fit into the shape of the airway and get wedged tightly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cook meat until very tender; <b>and</b></li> <li>Mince, shred or chop meat to 8mm x 8mm sized pieces.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepare as for 1–3 years; <b>or</b> offer thin strips of meat (around 4–6 cm long) that can be picked up with one hand or with a fork.</li> </ul>
<b>Food with bones</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fish</li> <li>Chicken nibbles</li> </ul>	Small bones present a choking risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remove all bones.</li> </ul>	
<b>Thick pastes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nut or seed butter</li> </ul>	Can fit to the shape of a child's airway or stick to side of airway.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use smooth thick pastes sparingly, spreading thinly and evenly onto bread.</li> </ul>	
<b>Fibrous or stringy food</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Raw pineapple</li> </ul>	Fibres make it difficult for children to break up the food into smaller pieces.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peel the skin or strong fibres off where possible; <b>and</b></li> <li>Slice these foods thinly across the grain of fibres.</li> </ul>	

# Background information and references

The Ministry of Health's current advice on preventing choking in young children is available at [www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/food-activity-and-sleep/healthy-eating/food-related-choking-young-children](http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/food-activity-and-sleep/healthy-eating/food-related-choking-young-children)

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