

Choking Hazards: Increased Prevalence Among Autistic Children

Understanding Risks and Protective Strategies for Canadian Families

Introduction

Choking hazards pose a significant threat to children's health and safety, but recent research and clinical observations indicate that these risks are especially prevalent among autistic children. As awareness around autism spectrum disorder (ASD) grows in Canada, it is crucial for parents, caregivers, and educators to understand why autistic children may face higher choking risks and how to mitigate them.

Why Are Choking Hazards More Common in Autistic Children?

Autistic children often experience differences in sensory processing, oral motor development, and behaviour that can contribute to an increased risk of choking. These factors include:

- **Oral Sensory Issues:** Many autistic children have oral hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity, affecting their ability to chew and swallow foods safely.
- **Restricted Food Preferences:** Children with ASD may prefer certain textures or types of food, sometimes choosing items that are more difficult to chew or swallow, such as dry or crunchy foods.
- **Behavioural Factors:** Rapid eating, stuffing the mouth, or not chewing food thoroughly are behaviours more commonly seen in autistic children.
- **Communication Challenges:** Difficulty expressing discomfort or distress may delay intervention if a child begins to choke.

Common Choking Hazards in the Home and Community

Canadian families should be aware that choking hazards are not limited to food. Common items include:

- Small toys, batteries, and coins (such as loonies and toonies)
- Hard candies, grapes, hot dogs, popcorn, and nuts
- Art supplies and household items like beads or buttons

For autistic children, vigilance is especially important since they may be drawn to mouthing or chewing non-food items due to sensory seeking behaviours.

Prevention Strategies for Parents and Caregivers

1. **Supervision:** Always supervise meal and snack times. Encourage slow eating and small bites.
2. **Food Preparation:** Cut foods into small, manageable pieces (e.g., quarter grapes, shred carrots).
3. **Education:** Teach children safe eating habits using visuals or social stories tailored to their communication needs.

4. Remove Hazards: Keep small objects and foods that pose a choking risk out of reach and regularly check play areas for potential hazards.
5. First Aid Training: Learn basic first aid for choking (e.g., the Heimlich manoeuvre) and ensure that all caregivers are familiar with emergency procedures. [How to Perform the Heimlich Maneuver | In Case of Emergency | Mass General Brigham](#)

Supporting Autistic Children in Community Settings

Schools, childcare centres, and community programs must also be proactive. Staff should receive training on autism-specific choking risks, adapt snack and meal routines to individual needs, and communicate closely with families about any incidents or concerns.

Conclusion

Choking hazards are a serious concern for all children, but autistic children may be at increased risk due to unique sensory and behavioural factors. By understanding these risks and implementing targeted prevention strategies, Canadian families and communities can help ensure the safety and well-being of autistic children across the country.