

Fact Sheet



Division of Developmental Disabilities Health Care Services

Asphyxiation

Health Information Fact Sheet #5

Asphyxiation: To cause a person to pass out or die by preventing normal breathing. Asphyxiation can occur during a range of different events such as choking, aspiration, restraint of a member, suffocation, or smothering.

Fact Sheet guidelines have been provided as general information, not as a substitution for medical treatment from a physician.

Some Facts about Asphyxiation:

- There are many different causes of asphyxiation.
- One common cause of asphyxiation is choking.
- Asphyxiation can occur during a choking event when something becomes lodged in the airway, thereby greatly reducing the amount of air received into the lungs.

Risk Factors (Causes):

Recognition of the following conditions will help alert you to potential risks:

- *Choking* (airway is blocked by a small object or piece of food)
- *Seizures* (asphyxiation can occur during the seizure which stops the individual's breathing)
- *Respiratory problems* (such as pneumonia, asthma, or exposure to pepper spray)
- *Sleep apnea* (due to oxygen)
- *Near drowning* (air in lungs is replaced by water)
- *Restraint* of an individual face down (prone restraint-which is prohibited)
- *Compression* of or pushing against an individual's chest; preventing adequate lung expansion during any type of restraint
- *Obesity* (compounds other risk factors)

What to Watch For:

The primary sign of a member experiencing asphyxiation is difficulty breathing. Additional signs to watch for include:

- Wheezing
- Inability to breathe normally
- Gagging/coughing/choking
- Clutching or grasping the throat agitation
- Loss of consciousness (the individual is not responsive)
- Hearing the statement: "I can't breathe!" (especially when a restraint compressing the chest is being used)
- Prolonged struggle or physical exertion

What to Do:

For individuals members who may have risk factors:

- Contact doctor regarding severity of risk factors and ways to decrease risk of asphyxiation.
- Communicate with the Support Coordinator and Person-Centered Support Plan (PCSP) team and update the Risk Assessment with appropriate prevention strategies.

Asphyxiation



Behavior Plan:

- Follow guidelines developed by the doctor and PCSP team.

Crisis Intervention:

- Ensure only approved techniques are used.

Choking, Swallowing Difficulties Or Aspiration:

- Follow the diet prescribed by the doctor.
- Keep the member in an upright position at least 45 minutes after meals and ask the doctor if food/fluids should be avoided before bedtime.

Seizures:

- Follow seizure protocol and instructions developed by the member doctor and PCSP team.

The Asphyxiation Fact Sheet is #5 in a series of Health Information Fact Sheets compiled by DDD Health Care Services.

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Staff Training In The Following:

- Understanding and recognizing emergency signs of asphyxiation (see below).
- Assisting members at risk for choking and seizures.
- Client Intervention Training (CIT I & II) for staff working with members identified with a Behavior Plan.
- First Aid & CPR Certification (which includes the Heimlich Maneuver).

Review fact sheets on seizure disorder #2 and aspiration #3.

Emergency

Call 9-1-1 **IMMEDIATELY** (and begin CPR if necessary) when you observe any of the following signs:

- Turning blue
- Wheezing
- Difficulty breathing or stops breathing
- Gasps for breath/unable to get air
- Becomes unconscious (does not respond)

