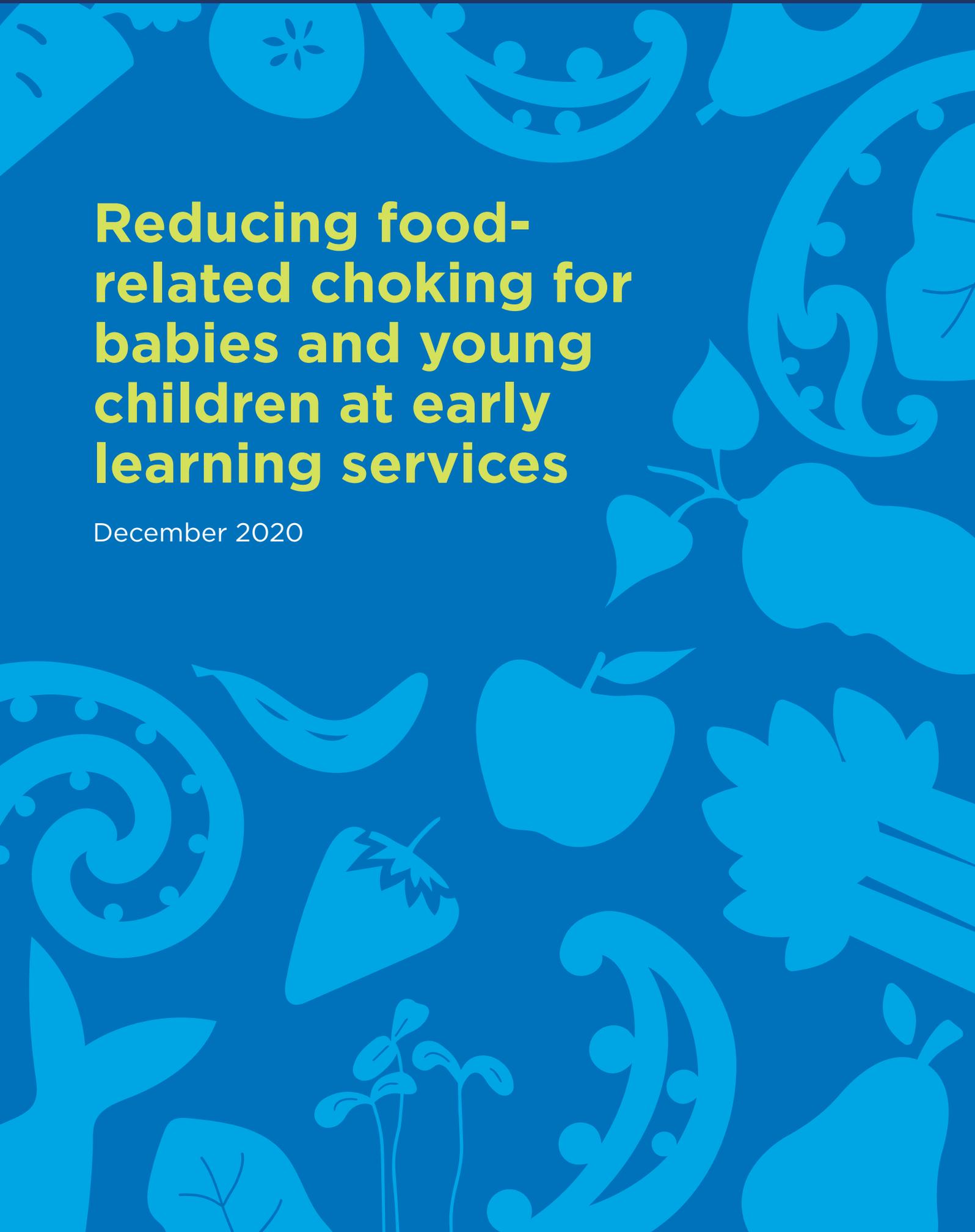


Reducing food- related choking for babies and young children at early learning services

December 2020



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Citation: Ministry of Health. 2020.
Reducing food-related choking for babies and young children at early learning services. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

Published in December 2020
by the Ministry of Health
PO Box 5013, Wellington 6140
New Zealand

ISBN 978-1-99-002970-7 (online)
HP 7526



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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.¹

This advice is based on the Ministry of Health's recommendations 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.



¹ 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.

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.

2 First aid

Some teachers and kaiako must know what to do if a baby or child is choking.

- ✓ Teachers and kaiako need to know **choking first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)**.

For more information see the *Well Child/Tamariki Ora Programme Practitioner Handbook* available on the Ministry of Health website (www.health.govt.nz).

3 Providing appropriate food

Research shows that some food poses a greater risk of choking on. To reduce the risk, early learning services should remove high-risk foods and change the texture or size and shape of others.

High-risk food to exclude

Exclude the following foods. They have the highest risk of choking on, and are either not practical to alter, have no or minimal nutritional value, or both:

- ✗ whole nuts or pieces of nuts
- ✗ large seeds, like pumpkin or sunflower seeds
- ✗ hard or chewy sweets or lollies
- ✗ crisps or chippies and corn chips
- ✗ hard rice crackers
- ✗ dried fruit
- ✗ sausages, saveloys and cheerios
- ✗ popcorn
- ✗ marshmallows.

High-risk food to alter

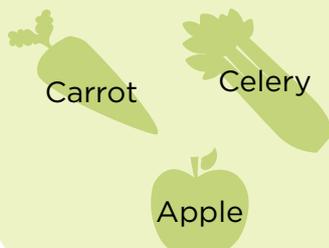
The following pages show which foods to alter, why and how to do it for different age groups. This advice is for children aged 1–6 years of age.

Information on appropriate food textures for newborns to one-year-olds is consistent with the Ministry of Health complementary feeding advice. See Eating for Healthy Babies and Toddlers <https://www.healthed.govt.nz/resource/eating-healthy-babies-and-toddlersng%C4%81-kai-t%C5%8Dtika-m%C5%8D-te-hunga-k%C5%8Dhungahunga>

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

Small hard food

For example, pieces of raw:



Choking risk:

Difficult for young children to bite through and break down enough to swallow safely. Pieces can become stuck in children's airways.

Options for tamariki of all ages:



- Grate raw carrot, apple or celery; **or**
- Spiralise to create vegetable or fruit spirals; **or**
- Slice thinly using a mandolin or vegetable peeler; **or**
- Cook until soft² and cut into strips (around 4–6cm long*) that can be picked up with one hand.

*You can use the ruler on the back page as a guide

For tamariki aged 4–6 years you can also:



Cut raw vegetables or fruit into sticks (around 4–6cm long*) that can be picked up with one hand.

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

Small round or oval food

*Fruit with stones,
for example:*



Peaches



Plums

*Fruit with large
seeds or large pips,
for example:*



Watermelon



Papaya

*Small round foods,
for example:*



Grapes



Cherry
tomatoes



Large
berries



Raw
green
peas



Choking risk:

Small round foods can lodge in children's airways.

Options for tamariki of all ages:



Remove the stone and chop to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller* (about half the width of a standard dinner fork).



Remove large seeds or large pips.



Quarter or finely chop grapes, large berries and cherry tomatoes to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller*.



Cook raw or frozen green peas and squash with a fork.

For tamariki aged 4-6 years you can also:



Cut into sticks (around 4-6cm long*) that can be picked up with one hand.



Halve or quarter grapes, large berries and cherry tomatoes.

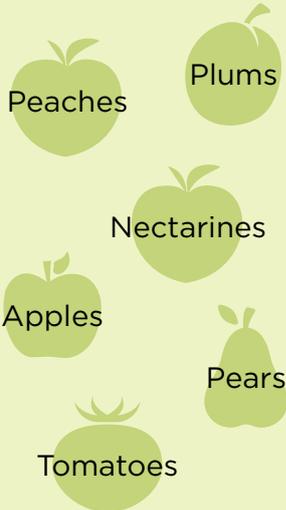


Whole cooked green peas are acceptable

*You can use the ruler on the back page as a guide

Fruit with skin

For example:



Choking risk:

Fruit skins are difficult to chew and can completely seal children's airways.

Options for tamariki of all ages:



Remove the stone and chop to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller* (about half the width of a standard dinner fork).



Grate raw apple or pear, **or** slice thinly using a mandolin or vegetable peeler.



Alternatively, cook until soft³ and cut into strips (around 4-6cm long*) that can be picked up with one hand.

Options for tamariki of all ages:



Finely chop tomato to an 8mm x 8mm size or smaller*.

For tamariki aged 4-6 years you can also:



Cut raw fruit into sticks (around 4-6cm long*) that can be picked up with one hand.

*You can use the ruler on the back page as a guide

3. '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 with skin or leaves

For example:



Chicken

Lettuce
and other raw
salad leaves



Spinach



Cabbage



Choking risk:

Food skins and leaves are difficult to chew and can completely seal children's airways.

Options for tamariki of all ages:



Remove skin from chicken.



Finely slice or chop salad leaves, lettuce, spinach and cabbage.

Compressible foods

For example:



Pieces of
cooked meat



Choking risk:

Can fit into the shape of the airway and get wedged tightly.

Options for tamariki of all ages:



Cook meat until very tender; **and**



Mince, shred or chop meat to 8mm x 8mm sized pieces*.

For tamariki aged 4-6 years you can also:



Offer thin strips of meat (around 4-6cm long*) that can be picked up with one hand or with a fork.

Food with bones

For example:



Choking risk:

Small bones present a choking risk.

For tamariki of all ages:



Remove all bones.

Fibrous or stringy food

For example:



Raw

pineapple



Choking risk:

Fibres make it difficult for children to break up the food into smaller pieces.

Thick pastes

For example:



Nut or seed butter



Choking risk:

Can fit to the shape of a child's airway or stick to side of airway.

For tamariki of all ages:



Use smooth thick pastes sparingly, spreading thinly and evenly onto bread.

For tamariki of all ages:



Peel the skin or strong fibres off where possible; **and** slice these foods thinly across the grain of fibres.

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

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