

Healthy Child Care Iowa Fact Sheet

Choking Prevention & Food: A Guide for Children Under 4 Years of Age | June 2026

Healthy Child Care Iowa (HCCI) works to improve the quality of health and safety in Early Care and Education (ECE) programs serving infants, toddlers, preschoolers, school-aged children and their families. The items included in fact sheets were identified recent findings on the *Health and Safety Checklist for Early Care and Education Programs*.

Children under the age of 4 are at a high risk of choking while eating. Young children are still learning how to chew food properly, and they often swallow food whole. Their small airways can become easily blocked. Child care providers can help reduce children's risk of choking when eating by preparing food in certain ways, not serving foods that are choking hazards and having ground rules for when children are eating.

Reduce the risk of choking

To reduce the risk of choking in young children, it's important to cut foods into small pieces before serving. **For infants, serve food in pieces that are one-quarter inch or smaller and for toddlers, serve pieces that are one-half inch or smaller.**

Cut tube-shaped foods such as baby carrots, string cheese, hot dogs, etc., into short strips rather than round pieces.



Avoid serving foods that are as wide around as a nickel, which is about the size of a young child's throat.



Cook foods until they are soft.



Cut Round Foods Into Smaller Pieces

Small round foods such as grapes, cherries, cherry tomatoes, and melon balls are common causes of choking.



Do not serve meat with bones.



Slice these items in half lengthwise.



Grind up tough meats.



Remove seeds from fruit.



Spread creamy peanut butter and nut butters in a thin layer.



Then slice into smaller pieces (no larger than 1/2 inch) when serving them to young children.



Scan the QR code to find your local CCNC or visit online at <https://hhs.iowa.gov/programs/programs-and-services/child-care/hcci>

Do not serve foods that are choking hazards

- Cheese cubes or blocks (Grate or thinly slice cheese before serving.)
- Dried fruit
- Gummy fruit snacks*
- Hard candy, including caramels, jelly beans, lollipops, etc.*
- Hard pretzels and pretzel chips
- Ice cubes*
- Marshmallows*
- Nuts and seeds
- Popcorn
- Raw carrot rounds
- Hot dogs, meat sticks and sausages



*Not creditable in the Child Nutrition Programs, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Ensure all food served to children with food allergy is appropriate and meets the care plan/diet modification.

Feeding solid food to infants under 1 year of age

Before around 6 months of age, most babies do not have the muscle control and coordination to eat solid foods. They are not “developmentally ready.”

Developmental signs that an infant may be ready to eat solid foods include:

- Holding their head up while seated upright in a high chair
- Opening their mouth when food is nearby
- Able to move his or her tongue to help swallow the food
- Closes lips around spoon and swallows successfully

Food preparation for infants

- Do not put food into a bottle
- Cook food until soft, puree or mash if needed
- Cut into thin, small slices (Less than ¼ inch)



Ground rules for all children when eating

- Allow plenty of time for meals and snacks
- Children should be always seated while eating solid food
- Do not allow children to eat while walking, playing, lying down or riding in a vehicle
- Staff must actively supervise children while eating and within arms reach for infants
- Encourage children to eat slowly, take small bites, and chew food completely before swallowing
- Menu items should reflect the developmental abilities of the children served



For more information, review the document *Reducing the Risk of Choking in Young Children at Mealtimes* on the USDA website.
wicworks.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/English_ReducingRiskofChokinginYoungChildren.pdf



For more information on feeding infants, visit the USDA website.
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/cacfp/feeding-infants>