

Suffocation Prevention: Elderly Adults (65+ yrs)

Suffocations Deaths, Virginia 2002-2006

- 571 suffocation deaths occurred from 2002-2006; 87% were unintentional.
- 83% of unintentional suffocation deaths were due to the inhalation/ingestion of an object.
- Suffocations are the third leading cause of unintentional injury related deaths among the elderly.
- The elderly are more likely to die from an unintentional suffocation injury than any other age group.

Suffocation Hospitalizations, Virginia 2002-2006

- 450 suffocation related hospitalizations occurred from 2002-2006; 99% were unintentional.
- 61% of suffocations were the result of the inhalation/ingestion of an object, while 38% were from food.
- The median cost of care for a suffocation related hospitalization was \$13,873.
- The average length of stay was over 7 days.

Prevention Tips

Suffocation is a preventable public health problem in Virginia. To prevent suffocations among the elderly:

- Avoid eating when not fully conscious (e.g. just awakening from sleep).
- Reduce environmental distraction.
- Select food with appropriate texture e.g. purees, thick (creamed soup) or semi-thick liquids (pureed fruit juices).
- Select appropriate utensils or feeding modules e.g. small straw, small spoon, enlarged-handle spoon, adapted chopsticks, scoop bowl, etc.
- Keep proper positioning (i.e. upright sitting, head in upright position and not tilted backwards).
- Oral-motor exercises can strengthen muscles and improve closure during swallowing, seek the advice from a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist or other appropriate health professionals.
- Ensure good denture fit.
- Prepare food by slicing and dicing foods to manageable pieces, cooking vegetables, chopping up hot dogs, and not eating candies or thick, sticky substances such as peanut butter.

Resources:

- Consumer Product Safety Commission: Neighborhood Safety Network
www.cpsc.gov/nsn/nsn.html
- National Safety Council
www.nsc.org
- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (CDC)
www.cdc.gov/ncipc
- Division of Injury and Violence Prevention, Virginia Health Department
www.vahealth.org/civp

Unintentional suffocations are the third leading cause of injury death among the elderly 65 and over.

Division of Injury and Violence Prevention
Virginia Department of Health
1-800-732-8333
www.vahealth.org/civp