

FEEDING AND EATING

Gagging, choking & spitting



Speech Pathology

Gagging and spitting foods are expected parts of developing eating skills when introducing new food textures or flavours. Gagging is different from choking.

What is choking?

Choking is when the airway becomes blocked. Some of the signs of choking include: gasping, blue colour around lips or eyes, wheezing, unable to produce sound such as crying.

For information about preventing choking and First Aid for choking, visit the Raising Children Network website.

What is gagging?

When we gag, our jaw comes down and our tongue comes forward. We don't lose our breath. In this way, gagging is different from choking, but the two are easy to confuse. As we develop eating skills, the gag reflex helps to prevent items going into the airway.

Unlike other reflexes, gagging can become a learned behaviour in response to negative experiences. Gagging can easily lead to vomiting. Although occasional gagging is expected, frequent gagging and/or vomiting can make mealtimes stressful and lead to food refusal.

When a child is developing as expected for her age, and has no difficulties with drinking or with eating pureed foods, frequent gagging might be:

- A sign of refusal.
- Protection against something new and unfamiliar such as a new food texture.
- An emotional response if mealtimes are stressful or if a child has a history of negative oral or feeding experiences (e.g. medical interventions around the gut or mouth; significant reflux or vomiting).
- A learned pattern of communication to say "I don't like this" or "You might give me lots of attention if I gag".
- A response to losing control over one's mouth and body (e.g. being pushed or forced to eat).
- A mouth full of food!

Ideas to reduce frequent gagging

Try to stay calm and provide reassurance if your child gags. Your child might gag more if you are upset, or have a big reaction to gagging. Try saying something like "Oh that was something different wasn't it? Oh well. I like the way you told me that was tricky". This will be reassuring for both you and your child.

- A child's sense of control over eating is important to help reduce a gag response. Control can be encouraged by her practising independent eating skills (e.g. feeding herself finger foods).
- Have food available for your child to feed herself.



- Let your child try foods in her own time at her own pace.
- Gently encourage your child to place their hands in food and put them in her mouth. This allows the child to experiment with their own gag response and helps them to work out when they do and don't need to protect their mouth and throat/airway.



- Try a different food texture (e.g. dissolvable foods such as easy to dissolve rice crackers or soft finger foods rather than 'lumpy' foods).
- Encourage your child to mouth 'hard munchable' foods (e.g. rusks) and hard objects (e.g. training toothbrushes or spoons). Dip the food or object into different textures.
- Provide gentle reassurance if your child appears cautious.
- Slow down—you might just need more time!

IMPORTANT

Do not force or push your child to eat. Forcing can increase gagging.

Spitting out lumps

'Lumpy' foods such as those in commercially available jars of 'baby foods' are usually difficult for children who are still developing chewing skills. These foods are technically a 'mixed' texture—a mixture of soft chunks and purée. Having two textures in one mouthful is often difficult for children to control in their mouth. Due to this, spitting out lumps is expected until they have further developed their eating and chewing skills.

If your child frequently spits out lumps:

- Try soft chewable food or dissolvable foods instead of lumpy foods.
- Help her develop early chewing skills (see 'Chewing practice' handout on RCH Speech Pathology website).
- Your child can try lumpy foods again after she has developed her chewing skills.

If your child is frequently gagging even after trying the above tips, ask your health professional for further advice.

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