

# **Advisory on Safety Measures to Prevent Choking and Swallowing Problems**

Recent studies report that annually nearly 3,000 people in the United States die from choking. A large percentage of those people are over 65 years of age. In addition, recent studies indicate that approximately 65% of people with developmental disabilities may have problems with swallowing. Problems with chewing and swallowing can result in aspiration of food or liquid into the lungs, leading to lung tissue damage and pneumonia. Swallowing problems may also increase the likelihood of choking on food and sudden death.

## **Recommendation**

The Long Term Care Bureau recommends providers and case managers be aware of individuals that are at greater risk for chewing and swallowing problems. In an effort to reduce the likelihood of aspiration and choking, safety measures should be put in place to ensure the health and safety of the waiver population, especially during times when individuals are eating.

## **Risk Factors**

Providers, case managers, and family and/or caregivers should be especially watchful with people who:

- Have had any choking or swallowing problems in the past;
- Have difficulty swallowing certain fluid consistencies and/or food textures;
- Have difficulty getting themselves into the proper position to eat;
- Have medical problems that affect gagging, choking and swallowing reflexes; Examples include: Cerebral Palsy, Brain Injury, Heartburn with reflux, Stroke and Dementia;
- Have a seizure disorder;
- Tend to eat too fast or stuff too much food in their mouth;
- Are taking medications that may relax the muscles used for chewing and swallowing, decrease their gag reflex or make a person too sleepy.

## **Internet Resources**

Providers, case managers, and family and/or caregivers are urged to view the following internet resources for further information regarding safety measures to prevent choking and other problems related to swallowing.

[www.state.nj.us/humanservices/ddd/documents/Documents%20for%20Web/Health\\_SafetyAlert\\_choking\\_071509.pdf](http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/ddd/documents/Documents%20for%20Web/Health_SafetyAlert_choking_071509.pdf)

[www.ombudmhdd.state.mn.us/alerts/chokingalert.pdf](http://www.ombudmhdd.state.mn.us/alerts/chokingalert.pdf)

[http://www.equipforequality.org/programs/abuseinvestigation/alert\\_chokingwarning.pdf](http://www.equipforequality.org/programs/abuseinvestigation/alert_chokingwarning.pdf)