Choking Emergencies

A person whose airway is blocked by a piece of food or other object can quickly stop breathing, lose consciousness and die. You must be able to recognize that the airway is obstructed and give care immediately. If you mistake an obstructed airway for a heart attack or some other serious condition, you might be slow to give the right kind of care or you might give the wrong kind of care.

A person who is choking may have either a complete or partial airway obstruction. A person with a partial airway obstruction can still move air to and from the lungs. This air allows the person to cough in an attempt to dislodge the object. If the victim is coughing forcefully or wheezing, do not interfere with attempts to cough up the object. Stay with the victim and encourage him or her to continue coughing to clear the obstruction. If coughing persists, call EMS personnel for help.

A partial airway obstruction can quickly become a complete airway obstruction. A person with a completely blocked airway is choking and is unable to speak, breathe or cough. Sometimes the victim may cough weakly and ineffectively or make high-pitched noises. All of these signs tell you the victim is not getting enough air to sustain life. Act immediately! If a bystander is available, have that person call EMS personnel while you begin to provide care.

When someone is choking, your goal is to reestablish an open airway as quickly as possible. Give abdominal thrusts—also called the Heimlich maneuver—to a conscious choking adult or child by standing or kneeling behind the victim and wrapping your arms around his or her waist. Make a fist with one hand and place the thumb side against the middle of the victim’s abdomen, just above the navel and well below the lower tip of the breastbone. Grab your fist with your other hand and give quick inward and upward thrusts into the abdomen. Repeat these thrusts until the object becomes dislodged or the victim becomes unconscious.

To learn more about caring for a conscious or unconscious choking victim, enroll in an American Red Cross first aid and CPR course. Visit http://www.redcross.org/services/hss/courses/community.html for more information.