

Backslaps dislodge Heimlich maneuver here

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A half-dollar-size chocolate chip cookie lodged in her throat threatened 4-year-old Lexie Welch's life.

Lexie's mother, Stefany, noticed her daughter was choking while in a suite in Van Andel Arena at a Griffins hockey game in mid-November.

She screamed for help and Lexie's father, Tom, tried CPR and the Heimlich maneuver without success. Grand Rapids Police Lt. Patrick Dean ran to the family's aid and went to work with back blows. That didn't work at first because Lexie's jaws were locked, but he kept at it and eventually dislodged the cookie.

So what's the most effective move when someone is choking?

"Back blows. That's really what they're teaching now at the police department," Dean said. "The Heimlich is more outdated than back blows."

Grand Rapids Police Sgt. Dave Schnurstein, responsible for instructing officers in basic first aid, said the department follows new guidelines the American Red Cross released in April.

The guidelines mark a distinct policy change. From 1985 to 2005, the Heimlich maneuver was the only recommended treatment for choking in the published guidelines of the American Heart Association and the American Red Cross.

The AHA continues to recommend only the Heimlich maneuver but has replaced that term with the more descriptive "abdominal thrust," said Bob Brenzing, communications director for the Association's Greater Midwest affiliate.

The procedure is named after Cincinnati physician Henry Heimlich, now 87.

Some medical experts say the Red Cross' new recommendations rightly downgrade the use of the Heimlich maneuver, which is a series of under-the-diaphragm abdominal thrusts to help a choking person dislodge the foreign object.

Experts found slaps on the back, abdominal thrusts and chest thrusts (like the Heimlich, only higher) have proved to help choking victims, but not in any specific order.

Why the change?

"The Heimlich maneuver is listed as possibly effective. It is not listed as most effective or better than another method, including back slaps and chest slaps," said Robert Baratz, a Boston physician and president of the National Council Against Health Fraud.

"No one method will relieve choking, but a combination of methods to get an object out of airways could. What's important is to save lives."

"As a choking rescue treatment, it (the Heimlich maneuver) is effective saving thousands of lives," acknowledged Peter Heimlich, owner of a wholesale fabric business in Atlanta. "That's not my beef.

"The serious question is, is it the best rescue treatment for choking? The back blows are less invasive. They're not going to hurt anybody. Abdominal thrusts, aka the Heimlich maneuver, can break a rib, damage internal organs."

Peter Heimlich accuses his famous father of a 10-year misinformation campaign, touting his method while maligning back blows as death blows.

"In Europe, they've been teaching back blows followed by abdominal thrust for 30 years," said Peter Heimlich. "They never heard about it killing people. No one is being sued like mad."

Reached at his home in Cincinnati last week, Heimlich, 87, referred questions to his spokesman, Robert Kraft.

"Dr. Heimlich's maneuver has proved itself over the last 30 years because of the lives it has saved," Kraft said.

Heimlich continues to assert it's a medical faux pas to use back blows to save a choking victim, he said.

"Back blow drives a food deeper into the throat rather than expel it," Kraft said.

Baratz calls that, "pure nonsense. "

The Red Cross' new guidelines for conscious victims recommend first applying backslaps. If that fails to remove the airway obstruction, abdominal thrusts are recommended.

For unconscious victims, the new guidelines recommend chest thrusts, a method first recommended in a 1976 study by Dr. Charles Guildner, whose results were duplicated in a year 2000 study by Dr. Audun Langhelle.

The American Heart Association recommends the Heimlich maneuver for clearing a blocked airway in conscious adults and children from ages 1 to 18.

It is not recommended for choking in infants younger than 1, said Nancy Dufoor, basic life support instructor for the AHA's Sterling Heights training center.

Dufoor swears by the Heimlich. It saved her 18-year-old daughter, Amanda, in July when she was choking on a piece of lettuce.

"She's alive today to talk about it," Dufoor said.

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