

Q&A for CDC Choking Game, MMWR, Feb 2008

1. What is the choking game?

The choking game is a dangerous activity that older children and early adolescents play to get a brief euphoric state, or “high.” They either choke each other or use a noose to choke themselves. After just a short time, children can pass out, which may lead to serious injury or even death from hanging or strangulation.

2. What are some of the other names used for the choking game?

As we analyzed numerous media reports, as well as scientific literature, blogs, etc., we found these names used to describe the choking game:

- Pass-out game
- Space Monkey
- Suffocation Roulette
- Scarf game
- The American Dream
- Fainting game
- Something dreaming game
- Purple hazing
- Blacking out/ Blackout
- Dream Game
- Flat liner
- California Choke
- Space Cowboy
- Airplaning
- Purple Dragon
- Cloud Nine

3. What are the warning signs that a child is playing the choking game?

Parents, educators, health-care providers, or peers may observe any of the following signs that can indicate a child has been engaging in the choking game:

- Discussion of the game or its aliases
- Bloodshot eyes
- Marks on the neck
- Wearing high-necked shirts, even in warm weather
- Frequent, severe headaches
- Disorientation after spending time alone
- Increased and uncharacteristic irritability or hostility
- Ropes, scarves, belts tied to bedroom furniture or doorknobs or found knotted on the floor
- The unexplained presence of dog leashes, choke collars, bungee cords, etc.
- Petechiae (pinpoint bleeding spots) under the skin of the face, especially the eyelids, or the conjunctiva (the lining of the eyelids and eyes)

4. Who is most at risk for injury from playing the choking game?

- Boys were much more likely to die from the choking game than girls.
- Most of the kids that died were 11-16 years old.
- Deaths have occurred all over the U.S. It isn't limited to one area of the country.
- Nearly all of the kids that died were playing the game alone when they died.
- More research is needed to identify factors related to kids' playing the choking game such as race/ethnicity, personality traits, grades, mental health status, or extracurricular activities. Research is also needed to determine strategies to reduce this type of behavior.

5. How quickly can someone die after they are strangled?

Someone can become unconscious in a matter of seconds. Death can occur within a matter of minutes.

6. Are there non-fatal, long-term consequences of the choking game?

- Children can lose consciousness and kill brain cells by depriving their brain of oxygen. In severe cases, children can go into a coma and have seizures
- Children can receive concussions or break bones (including their jaws) from falls associated with the choking game
- Children can also have hemorrhages of the eye.

7. How can the choking game be prevented?

Right now, we don't have any research on the best strategies to prevent the choking game. But we do know that this is a public health threat that many parents, educators, and health-care providers are unaware of. It is important for them to know about the choking game and the warning signs that adolescents may be playing the game.

8. There seemed to be far fewer deaths in 2007 than in 2005 or 2006. Does this mean the choking game is going away?

While there were more deaths in 2005 and 2006 than in 2007, there could be multiple explanations for it. One is that, indeed, the choking game may be fading away. Another possibility is that just as many kids are playing the choking game, but fewer are doing it alone. However, it is also possible that the increased media attention to the choking game in 2005 led to reporters becoming more aware of the choking game and more inclined to publish stories about it than they are now. Although we did our search in November of 2007, it is unlikely that many more cases were reported in the last two months of the year.

9. What is CDC doing to help prevent adolescents from playing the choking game?

This report is the first attempt to measure the magnitude of this problem. Possible next steps might include including a question about this game in behavior surveys that are given to the teen population. Such surveys could identify characteristics of children that are associated with playing the game. In addition, we will continue to use the available sources of information to track choking game fatalities and try to confirm that the numbers have declined.

10. Why is this information important?

There is no scientific data to know how many youth have heard of this game, though anecdotal stories suggest 60-75%. However, one youth health risk behavior survey in Williams County, Ohio found that 11% of 12-18 year olds had played the choking game, and by the time kids reached senior year of high school (i.e., 17-18 years old), 19% had played. If that many youth are playing the game, and disability and death can occur so quickly, it is important that parents, educators, and health care providers be aware of this game and respond to its warning signs.

11. Why would a child/adolescent want to play the choking game?

While we don't know for sure, anecdotal evidence suggests that children hear from peers that it is a cool, "dreamy" feeling. It is a legal high, so it isn't going to get them into trouble; and it's free so anyone can do it.

12. How can you be sure these cases aren't suicide?

For the deaths in the report, we only selected those cases that could be clearly attributed to the choking game. Deaths were not included unless the report clearly mentioned that they were a result of the choking game. In general, medical examiners and coroners distinguish choking game deaths from suicides based on findings at the scene and interviews with family and friends.

13. Should parents and teachers talk to kids about the choking game?

Right now, we only know a little bit of information about the characteristics of the children and teens that die from the choking game. No one has studied the best methods of preventing the choking game. We are not recommending that all parents discuss this game with their children. However, we encourage parents to be familiar with the choking game and aliases and some of the warning signs that might occur. If a parent thinks his or her child is involved, they should talk with them, and seek additional help if necessary.

14. With only 82 deaths, why should we be so concerned about choking game?

The number of teens playing the game probably far exceeds the number of deaths and some may suffer nonfatal but serious injuries from it. In addition, we probably did not capture all the deaths from the choking game in this study because newspapers typically report only about 50% of injury deaths.

15. Why did you use media reports to identify choking game incidents and deaths?

We reviewed multiple national data sources commonly used to identify child deaths, as well as injuries treated in emergency departments, but we found that these data sources did not reliably list the choking game as a cause of death or injury. We did find that media reports often mentioned the choking game. We know from other studies that have examined media reports about various injuries that newspapers typically report about half of the deaths that actually occur. Children's deaths are more likely to be reported in the media, but we don't have any systematic national data for comparison.