

## Homicidal Choking – A Case Report

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**Abstract:** Choking is a form of asphyxia caused by obstruction within the airways, usually between the pharynx and bifurcation of trachea. The individual develops hoarseness, respiratory difficulty and then suddenly collapses. It is commonly associated with alcohol intoxication, neurological injury or senility. It is usually accidental. Homicidal choking is very rare and is practicable only when the victim is suffering from disability or disease. We encountered a case of choking in a 6 years old male child, who was missing under mysterious circumstances for last 2 days. His dead body was found in the heap of straw at the back of his house. The dead body was in early stage of putrefaction and it was referred from General Hospital to Department of Forensic Medicine, PGIMS, Rohtak, for postmortem. On postmortem examination multiple contusions were noticed over the scalp along with injuries over other parts of the body. Multiple pieces of straws were present in larynx and trachea up to carina and in the right bronchus. The pieces of straws were also present in esophagus and stomach. The cause of death was opined as asphyxia due to choking coupled with head injury.

**Keywords:** Choking, Asphyxia, Contusion, Homicidal, Trachea, Carina.

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### INTRODUCTION

Choking is a form of asphyxia caused by an obstruction within the airways, usually between the pharynx and bifurcation of trachea. The individual develops hoarseness, respiratory difficulty and then suddenly collapses. It is commonly associated with alcohol intoxication, neurological injury or senility. It is mostly accidental [1]. Homicidal choking is very rare and is practicable only when the victim is suffering from disability or disease. We encountered a case of choking in a six years old male child, who was missing in mysterious circumstances for last 2 days. His dead body was found in the heap of straw at the back of his house.

### HISTORY

One day police was informed that a 6 year old child was missing for the last two days, when he went for playing outside from his house. The police took immediate action and after careful search with the help of sniffer dogs, the body was found in the heap of straw at the back of house. It was suspected that the child was murdered and the dead body was hidden in the heap of straw by unknown person. The dead body was brought to nearest Civil Hospital for postmortem examination by police. It was referred to Department of Forensic Medicine, PGIMS, Rohtak by the board of doctors. The

apparent cause of death as mentioned in police papers was: “*Agayat Kaaran Se*”.

### AUTOPSY FINDINGS

External examination: Body was in early stage of putrefaction. It was smudged with straws & mud. It was emitting foul smell. Maggots were crawling all over the body. Facial features were not recognizable. Blood tinged secretions were present around mouth and nostrils. Skin, soft tissue showed decomposition changes. Following injuries were noticed over the body:

1. A diffuse reddish contusion was present over the left parieto-occipital region of scalp. On dissection underlying tissues were ecchymosed. On reflection of scalp pericranial infiltration was present over left parietal region of skull. On opening the cranial cavity brain was softened and converted into pasty material showing hemorrhagic tinged over left side of brain.
2. A reddish contusion was present over the dorsal aspect of left elbow joint. On dissection underlying tissues were ecchymosed.

Internal examination: Mouth, pharynx & esophagus contained multiple pieces of straw and mucoid secretions. Hyoid was intact. Larynx contained multiple pieces of straw and mucoid secretions. Trachea contained multiple pieces of straw and mucoid

secretions up to carina and in the right bronchus. Stomach contained pieces of straw and mucosa was

congested. Other internal organs were putrefied and softened.



**Fig-1: External appearance of the child brought for Post-mortem examination**



**Fig-2: Diffuse Contusion over the scalp**



**Fig-3: Pericranial infiltration of blood over the skull**



**Fig-4: Putrefied brain with hemorrhagic tinge**



**Fig-5: Contusion over left elbow**



**Fig-6: Pieces of straw in pharynx**



**Fig-7: Pieces of straws in oesophagus**



**Fig-8: Pieces of straws in Trachea**



Fig-9: Pieces of straws in trachea

### OPINION

The cause of death was opined as asphyxia consequent to choking coupled with head injury.

### DISCUSSION

In choking, the air passage is occluded by some foreign body in the airway or due to some pathology or foreign substance in the neighboring structure (e.g. Esophagus). It is a form of asphyxia caused by impaction of a foreign body in the glottis or the windpipe. Mostly it is accidental in nature but very rarely homicidal. Complete blockage of the air passage is not required to cause death by choking. Death can occur from laryngeal spasm, when small objects block the lumen only partially [2]. Death in choking could be due to asphyxia or vagal inhibition. When a foreign body gets impacted at the bifurcation of trachea, all of a sudden it can cause death by both asphyxia and reflex parasympathetic cardiac inhibition. A large proportion of deaths occur suddenly before any possible hypoxic manifestations have time to take effect [3].

Certain groups of people are generally seen as at risk for choking: young children, the elderly, neurological injuries, alcoholics, drug addicts and institutionalized psychiatric patients [4]. The deaths typically are peaked at the extreme of age with young children and the elderly having the greatest rate of fatal choking [5]. Aspiration of a foreign body is common in children and cause upper airway obstruction leading to significant morbidity and mortality [6].

Many times it has been reported that even a small object such as piece of coconut, pieces of straws, gram-seed or monkey-nut partially blocking the air passage might cause death due to laryngeal spasm. Other foreign bodies noted are potato skin, fruit-stone, corn, button, coin, cork, rag, India-rubber teat, live fish, roundworm, mud, leaves [7].

Head injuries are one of the most effective methods of homicide. The head is a vital organ and the most exposed part of body to receive injuries. A cranio-cerebral injury due to blunt trauma causes more homicidal deaths as compared with blunt trauma injury to other areas of the body [8].

In the present case, the six years old child had a head injury with hard and blunt object which could have resulted in neurological damage and consequently he was choked with pieces of straw without application of much force.

### CONCLUSION

In this case the autopsy and careful history helped in determination of cause and manner of death. The autopsy revealed that the child was hit over his head by hard and blunt object and subsequently he was choked by pieces of straw. This clearly indicates that this is a case of homicide by choking coupled with head injury. Once again establishing the fact, "No technology or investigatory tool can replace diligent history taking & meticulous autopsy".

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