



Loss Control Insight

Heimlich Maneuver

Imagine inventing a procedure that saves thousands of lives around the world each year, only to discover that spin-off applications could save millions more. That's what Dr. Henry Heimlich, inventor of the Heimlich Maneuver, has learned since his research into rescuing people from choking was first published in 1974.

In simple terms the Heimlich maneuver is a rapid first aid procedure to treat choking due to upper airway obstruction by foreign objects such as food, a toy, or other object.

In desperation, people have since adapted his maneuver to save both near-drowning victims and people suffering deadly asthma attacks from almost certain death. Before Heimlich discovered a simple way to save most people who were choking from food blocking their airways, there were some 6,000-7,000 recorded choking deaths occurring every year in the United States.

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After many years as an esophageal surgeon, fast-forward to 1973, when Heimlich was surprised to read that choking was the sixth-leading cause of accidental death.

He had thought it was a relatively rare occurrence. "The Red Cross had for 45 years been teaching people that if you're choking, you slap that person on the back," he says. Ironically, as early as the mid-1800s, scientists had been warning that back-slapping was deadly, because it frequently drove the object further into the airway and caused death.

"I started thinking about how to get an object to go out of the mouth, away from the lungs. I thought if you could compress the lungs, you could get air to flow out and force the object out of the mouth." His early experiments were performed with great success on dogs. While he says he is against "the excessive use of animals on experiments," the animals didn't die and the Heimlich Maneuver since has saved many choking pets. It didn't take long for a major Chicago newspaper to pick up the story in 1974 and the news of Heimlich's discovery swept the world.

A fire chief soon wrote to tell him he had accidentally saved his young son from choking to death many years earlier, without knowing just how. He tripped while carrying the boy and landed on top of him. The piece of food that had been blocking the toddler's airway flew out, thanks to his father's unintended and unconventional Heimlich procedure.

Stories of lay people successfully saving lives using the procedure began flowing within weeks of the announcement of his discovery and the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) told Heimlich it wanted to name the maneuver in his honor.

The beauty of the Heimlich Maneuver is in its simplicity. It is not complicated to learn and children as young as four have saved lives using it. No tools are necessary – only the hands. The subsequent lifesaving applications of the maneuver for people who were either drowning or suffering severe asthma attacks came as a surprise to Heimlich.

In the first case, a drowning man was pulled from the water by a lifeguard, who unsuccessfully performed CPR and said there was nothing more he could do. A doctor at the scene said, "Let me try something," and performed the Heimlich Maneuver. Water gushed from the drowning man's lungs and he immediately began gasping for breath.

In a near-drowning, the victim may be taken out of the water, but water is still flooding the person's lungs. Unless it is removed, the person will certainly die, says Heimlich.

"In the United States every year 1,000 children die of drowning in the home. Toddlers will fall into pails of water or toilet bowls or drown in bathtubs or pools," says Heimlich. "Every parent or neighbor or brother or sister could save (many of) these children if they just did the Heimlich Maneuver until no water flowed from the lungs."

The Heimlich Maneuver saves lives, it should be used only when the airway obstruction is severe and life is endangered. Do not interfere if the choking person can speak, cough forcefully, or breathe adequately. Take the time to learn how to properly administer