

Strangulation is a dangerous form of assault with most victims being women or children. Victims often report being “choked”. However, choking occurs when a foreign object is caught in the throat and cuts off the flow of air to the lungs. Strangulation is when someone puts pressure on the neck or chest to prevent breathing by closing the windpipe. This stops the flow of blood going to the brain. Strangulation is a serious event which may cause injuries that become life threatening days or weeks after the assault.

It is common to feel severe pain. Victims may feel they are about to die at the hands of their attacker. They may struggle to break free often scratching themselves or their attacker while trying to remove the force upon their necks.

The brain is very sensitive to a lack of oxygen. Within a few seconds of neck pressure the victim will become unconscious (pass out). Irreversible brain damage may occur in as little as 3 minutes. Death may occur within 4 to 5 minutes if pressure on the neck is not released.

During Strangulation

Victims may lose consciousness if the large vessels that take blood to the brain (carotid arteries) or the large vessels that return blood to the heart and lungs (jugular veins) are held closed by pressure. It takes a little more pressure than a strong handshake to close the vessels. The airway (trachea) can be narrowed or closed with more pressure. When this happens the lungs do not receive enough oxygen to supply the brain. Unconsciousness and death may follow.

Signs of Life Threatening Strangulation

A victim requires examination as soon as possible by a healthcare provider if there is:

- loss of consciousness
- loss of bladder or bowel control

Blood vessels may burst within the brain even when there are no marks on the body. The inside of the throat may swell and restrict the flow of blood or air hours or days after strangulation. Clots may form during the attack and can break loose and cause a stroke.

Most victims do not have visible injuries and recover fully. Victims should seek medical attention anyway, especially if pregnant. A healthcare provider may detect serious injuries that had gone unnoticed.

The Saskatchewan Health Authority gratefully acknowledges the National Family Justice Center Alliance for allowing us to reproduce, in part *Facts Victims of Choking (Strangulation) Need to Know!*



When to Seek Medical Attention

Victims and care givers must watch for signs and symptoms that may signal internal injuries:

- restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, agitation
- headache, confusion or forgetfulness, light-headedness, dizziness, fainting spells
- changes in vision, such as blurring
- flushed face, pinhead sized red spots on face, eyes and eyelids, neck, scalp, and shoulders
- reddened whites of the eyes or drooping eyelids
- blood, buzzing or ringing in the ear(s)
- swollen lips, bruising or cuts to the lips, swelling of the tongue
- bruising or swelling under the chin, including finger or fingernail marks, or marks from an object used to strangle such as a phone cord or belt
- coughing, drooling, changes in breathing
- changes in voice or difficulty swallowing, nausea, or vomiting
- tingling or weakness of hands and feet
- scratch marks by the victim on face and neck, shoulders, back, and chest
- loss of bladder or bowel control

Feelings after Strangulation

During strangulation most victims feel they might not survive. They feel the person who is hurting them has the power to take their lives during the attack. This is true. Strangulation can take the life of the victim even if that is not the intention of the attacker. Many victims suffer great emotional distress. It is strongly recommended strangulation victims receive counselling.

For 24 hour professional health advice and information, call **Health Line 811**, present to your nearest Emergency Department or for immediate assistance **911**.



Victims may experience symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

- startles easily
- forgetfulness and confusion
- inability to make decisions
- fear for the safety of loved ones
- hallucinations
- alcohol and drug abuse
- flashbacks and nightmares
- feeling helpless and defenseless
- extreme fearfulness
- changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- thoughts of suicide

