

Foreign Body Management in the Dental Office

1. An Object Disappears

The response to an object in the mouth which disappears from sight depends on the size and sharpness of the object. It has an 80% chance of being ingested, 20% chance of being aspirated. Sometimes a stridor or wheezing sound will indicate an aspiration; only a chest x-ray will tell for sure.

2. A Trip to the Emergency Room

The patient should be taken to the nearest emergency room for a chest x-ray, by a family member. Most “Urgent Cares” are not equipped to take chest x-rays- but check with your local one. An ambulance is appropriate if the patient is in duress (discomfort due to the object), but this is very infrequent. The patient should be told, in a calm manner, *“this is only a precaution but it is very important so we can make the correct decisions on what, if anything, to do.”*

3. Wait and See” or Surgery?

Aspirations almost always need an emergency bronchoscopic surgery.

Ingestions usually pass uneventfully within 7 days. Best treatment is to take an abdominal x-ray if the object was not seen in the stool after one week, or immediately if symptoms occur (*could indicate blockage or perforation*).

Ingested items which are “**sharp**” or are **over a diameter of 1 inch or 2.5 inches in length** should be endoscopically removed within the first 4 hours, while they are still in the stomach. Most dental devices (crowns, burs, healing caps) are not considered “sharp”. Exceptions would be endo files, rubber dam clamps.

It is a prudent risk-management idea to offer to pay the patient’s balance of medical bills *after their medical insurance pays*, “within reason”, to avoid them becoming agitated and threatening to sue you. Ask your agent if you have this as a covered special benefit on your professional liability insurance policy.

Avoid problems by checking the bur for seating every time. Repair any handpiece that makes odd noises or fails to hold the bur when tugged on.

PPP insureds have access to Risk Managers who can help if you need further advice in the case of a swallowed object. Note that this is not a 24/7 service, however, so use the above advice if urgency is an issue, such as an aspiration.