

The Choking Game

It has become apparent that some young people are using suffocation to get a brief high.

This practice has several nicknames, including The Choking Game, Fainting Game, Blackout, the Pass-Out Game and Flatliner.

“Because this giddy feeling can be triggered without alcohol or drugs, some people believe it is harmless.” (Dr. James Cantor, Psychologist and Senior Scientist with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH))

*Self-suffocation is not a game.
It is a dangerous activity that can cause permanent brain damage and even death.
(Urkin & Merrick, 2006)*

What is the Choking Game?

Young people use different ways to cut off the oxygen supply to the brain. This causes a lightheaded feeling or high that lasts a few seconds before they lose consciousness and when the pressure is released.

This loss of oxygen is never safe. It results in thousands of brain cells dying. (Ralph Cash, A Dangerous High, 2007)

What are the Risks of Self Suffocation?

- Loss of oxygen always causes the death of brain cells
- Permanent brain damage
- Short-term memory loss
- Hemorrhage and harm to retinas
- Stroke or seizures
- Coma
- Death

(Neumann-Potash, 2006)

Death caused by suffocation games is often misdiagnosed as a suicide. In reality, the individual did not mean to cause his or her own death.

Who is Playing?

Children and adolescents 10 to 16 years old are the main group participating, though older teenagers are known to participate as well. Most of them do not show signs of being troubled or at risk.

Young people participate in groups or alone but the risks are much greater when someone is alone. About five per cent of Ontario students reported participating in the choking game to get high at least once. (2009 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey report from CAMH)

Youth participate in response to peer pressure, curiosity or in search of a thrill or cheap high that doesn't involve substances and not because they are depressed or angry. (Dylan Blake Foundation for Adolescent Behaviors)

“Regardless of the motivation for self-suffocation, the potential harms are the same.” (Dr. Cantor)

Warning signs that someone is self-suffocating include:

- Unusual marks on the neck or unexplained cuts and bruises, which youth may attempt to hide with scarves or other clothing
- Hoarseness and bloodshot eyes
- Frequent headaches
- Locked doors and an excessive need for privacy
- Belts or ropes with odd knots tied to furniture
- Disorientation after spending time alone (Neumann-Potash, 2006)

Decision Making and Staying Safe

It is important to tell children and youth the facts about suffocation games and other health-related risks. They need the information to make informed decisions.

Teenage years are a time of increased risk-taking behavior. The rate of injury death doubles during this stage. (Smartrisk)

Parents need to be well informed and should be prepared to speak about the dangers of these and other risky behaviors. In fact, researchers have discovered that adolescents who believe their parents know a lot about what they're up to are more likely to select peers who have a positive influence on them and are less likely to take dangerous risks. (Smartrisk)

Parents play a crucial role in the lives of their teens. Parents can help in many ways by:

- Providing support
- Empowering their adolescents to make informed decisions
- Setting boundaries and expectations for their teens
- Promoting positive values and role modelling desired behaviours

Make time to engage and openly communicate with your teen about issues that are important to them and listen without judgment to their thoughts and opinions. The key is building strong and supportive relationships with the young people in your life.

If you have questions about the behaviours described in this brochure, or you worry that a student, child or friend is involved in these behaviours, please consider speaking to someone who can help. People who can help include a teacher, guidance counsellor, principal or vice principal, school support staff such as psychological services or social work staff, parents, family doctors, community counsellor or police officer. Or, you can contact CAMH.

Where to Get More Information

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

Website: www.camh.ca

Tel: 416-535-8501

Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play (G.A.S.P.)

Website: www.gaspinfo.com

Email: contact@gaspinfo.com

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)

Website: www.nasponline.org/resources/self-injury-resources.aspx

Kids Help Phone

Website: www.kidshelpphone.ca

Tel: 1 (800) 668-6868

York Region Community and Health Services Health Connection

Website: www.york.ca

Tel: 1 (800) 361-5653

Teen Mental Health

www.teenmentalhealth.org

Search Institute

www.search-institute.org

Resiliency Canada

www.resiliencycanada.ca

The fact sheet was developed in collaboration with the York Region District School Board, the York Catholic District School Board, and York Region Community and Health Services.