Assessment of the LifeVac, an anti-choking device, on a human cadaver with complete airway obstruction

We performed an independent study to determine whether the anti-choking device, LifeVac, is capable of removing a food bolus from an obstructed airway when the potential for choking as a medical emergency exists.

The LifeVac is a non-powered, single patient, portable suction apparatus (anti-choking device) developed for resuscitating choking victims when standard current choking protocol has been followed without success. The LifeVac is designed with a patented valve to prevent air from exiting through the mask. This patented valve is designed to prevent the strong pulse of air from pushing food or objects further downward, lodging the blockage deeper into the airway of the victim. A one-way suction stream is thus created to remove the lodged food or object. The negative pressure generated by the force of the suction is 3 times greater than the highest recorded choke pressure. The mean peak airway pressure with abdominal thrusts is 26.4 ± 19.8 cmH2O and with chest compressions, 40.8 ± 16.4 cmH2O, respectively (P = .005, 95% confidence interval for the mean difference 5.3–23.4 cmH2O). The LifeVac generates over 300 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg) of suction.

Each year, approximately 10,000–6000 Americans die from choking. Children and the elderly present much higher risks for choking. At least one child dies from choking on food every five days in the U.S. and more than 10,000 children are taken to hospital emergency departments each year for food-choking incidents. Semisolid foods are the major cause of a large number of asphyxiations, especially among the elderly.

This study was conducted at Fusion Solutions, a cadaver based training center in New York. An unselected, recently diseased individual was employed in the study. The subject was a 71 year old, Caucasian female, 5.13 pounds, 65 inches with a Body Mass Index of 25. Medical history was remarkable for breast cancer.

The paramedic technician placed a simulated food bolus 7 to 10 centimeters into the subject’s upper airway. The obstruction was visually and verbally confirmed prior to use of the LifeVac apparatus. Three simulated bolus obstructions made of clay were used: a 2 cm (small), a 2.1/2 cm (medium) and a 3 cm (large) size. The simulated bolus were attached to a string to maintain control during the study.

The paramedic technician placed an adult LifeVac mask on the cadaver following operating guidelines to remove the lodged bolus. The author observed and recorded the success rate. It was noted on one trial that a second pull was required to ensure a tighter seal following an initial failed trial. This achieved increased suction and ensured removal of the simulated bolus. The LifeVac removed the bolus successfully 49/50 trials on the first trial.

The American Red Cross’ recent first-aid protocol de-emphasizes the use of the Heimlich for treating a conscious choking victim. The new

Figure 1. Placement of large simulated bolus (3 cm) 7-10 centimeters past tongue base into upper airway of subject.

Figure 2. Placement of LifeVac device on the cadaver using guideline protocol to achieve proper seal to operate device.
protocol recommends calling 9-1-1, then giving the person several sharp blows to the back, right between the shoulder blades, with the heel of the hand. If this doesn’t clear the obstructed airway, “abdominal thrusts” should be tried next, alternating with repeated back blows, until the person breathes freely or loses consciousness.

According to Langhelle et al., standard chest compressions are more effective than the Heimlich maneuver for treating complete airway obstruction by a foreign body.

The Heimlich maneuver on a frail individual who is in a wheelchair can be difficult to administer expeditiously. Complications include rib fractures, gastric or esophagus perforations, aortic valve cusp rupture, diaphragmatic herniation, jejunal perforation, hepatic rupture, mesenteric laceration. There has also been a new case of fatal hemoperitoneum due to hilar laceration of the spleen.

When treating a choking child, John Hopkins School of Medicine warns, "When applying the Heimlich maneuver, be careful not to use too much force so you don’t damage the ribs or internal organs."

Choking is a medical emergency that warrants prompt, precise action by anyone available. This results of this study revealed that the LifeVac was able to clear a completely obstructed upper airway. Given the potentially life-or-death nature of given situations, the LifeVac is deemed to be a clinically effective alternative to current emergency protocol to save choking victims. Hence, the LifeVac can be utilized as a safe, simple and effective method to use in critical situations.

Speech Pathologists treat swallowing disorders. Dysphagia treatment consists of teaching compensatory strategies, aspiration precautions, appropriate diet and caregivers training to prevent risks for aspiration. The LifeVac is non invasive and can be used by anyone. Both medical personnel and laypersons alike. Results of this study suggest that the LifeVac can be included as part of the guidelines used for basic life support management of choking victims.

Mimi Julianno, MA, CCC-SLP
Visiting Nurse Services and Hospice of Suffolk, Northport, NY
Corresponding author
E-mail address: rnbmimi@aol.com

Robert Domingo, PhD
Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders LIU Post, Nassau University Medical Center, Farmingdale, NY, USA

Mary S. Mooney, PT, DPT
Visiting Nurse Services & Hospice of Suffolk, Northport, NY, USA

Alex Trupiano, E.M.T
Nassau County Police Department Emergency Ambulance Bureau, Nassau County, NY, USA

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ajem.2016.03.047