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The Cover

In the past, choking on food was often mistakenly diagnosed as a heart attack (hence the misnomer, "café coronary"), because of the preponderance of middle-aged and elderly victims. Now, suffocation due to an ingested object is recognized as a leading cause of accidental death; the National Safety Council ranked it seventh, slightly behind firearms, in 1973, when 2,600 persons died of it, 1,400 of them aged 45 or over.

The key to treatment is speed—the choking victim usually dies within a few minutes. Slapping the victim on the back is futile, as is administration of oxygen or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Attempting to remove the obstructing object by reaching into the victim's throat with one's fingers or an instrument is effective only if the entire bolus is retrieved, and tracheotomy is not to be attempted by the untrained. What is needed is a quick, simple method that can be used by laymen as well as professionals.

A recently proposed technique, the Heimlich maneuver, and its reported success are described in the SPECIAL COMMUNICATION on p 398. Also, on p 416, an editorial statement by the AMA Commission on Emergency Medical Services emphasizes the importance of distinguishing food-choking from actual coronaries before the Heimlich maneuver is attempted. (Photograph by Slim Aaron © Photo Researchers)—JEAN A. HELLMAN

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