

Recognizing Medical Emergencies

How do you tell the difference between a true emergency and a minor problem? Certain symptoms are so alarming that the need for emergency care—or even an ambulance—is obvious. But what should you do about more common illnesses and injuries?

Only a doctor can diagnose medical problems, but you can protect your family's health by learning to recognize certain symptoms.

Know which symptoms to watch for. According to the American College of Emergency Physicians, the following are warning signs of a medical emergency:

- Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath
- Chest or upper abdominal pain or pressure
- Fainting
- Sudden dizziness, weakness or change in vision
- Change in mental status (such as unusual behavior, confusion, difficulty arousing).
- Sudden, severe pain anywhere in the body
- Bleeding that won't stop
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Coughing up or vomiting blood
- Suicidal or homicidal feelings

You should also be familiar with the symptoms of common illnesses and injuries.

Talk to your regular doctor before you have an emergency. Ask what you should do if you think someone in your family needs emergency care. Should you call the doctor's office first? Should you go straight to the emergency department? What should you do when the doctor's office is closed?

Trust your instincts. Parents are usually very good at recognizing signs of unusual behavior or other symptoms that indicate an emergency. Many other factors, including the time of day, other medical problems, or state of mind can make an otherwise minor medical problem an "emergency."

A medical emergency is a sudden illness or injury that needs care right away. This happens when a person's health problem may cause him or her to die or lose a limb like a finger, arm, leg, or something else. If they do not get help, they could have very bad problems or die.

Recognizing Medical Emergencies

The following are examples of medical emergencies:

- Chest pain or pressure with sweating and shortness of breath
- Loss of consciousness, fainting
- Difficulty breathing
- A person may have eaten something poisonous or had too much medicine
- Bleeding that does not stop
- Bad injuries from a fall or accident
- Rape (sexual assault)
- Being beaten by someone
- When someone tries to kill himself or herself (a suicide attempt)
- The start of seizures or convulsions or ones that do not stop
- A sudden asthma attack that does not stop
- Sudden numbness of or not being able to move (paralysis) an arm, leg or one side of the body
- Loss of vision, not being able to see
- A sudden very bad headache, especially with neck pain or change in consciousness
- A change in mental ability, such as not knowing where you are or who your friends, family or coworkers are
- When a women starts to have a baby too soon

In any of these situations, you can get medical help from the emergency medical system. In most places you can reach the emergency medical system by calling 911 from any phone. Stay calm, speak slowly and clearly and explain your problem to the emergency person who answers the phone.

That person, the emergency operator will send an ambulance, fire truck, or a special group of people trained for emergencies. As soon as the people arrive they will begin helping the sick or hurt person and will keep helping this person all the way to the hospital.

Knowing when to call 911

Figuring out if medical symptoms warrant a call to 911 or a trip to the emergency department can be hard. People are often afraid to call, thinking their medical complaints aren't severe enough to "bother" emergency care providers. But you aren't really bothering anyone. Paramedics and emergency medical technicians are supposed to respond to medical emergencies, and those emergencies are defined by the patients rather than the responders.

When trying to decide whether or not to **call 911** or go to the emergency department, better to decide to go rather than not go.

Call 911 instead of trying to take an injured or ill person to the hospital yourself. It seems like waiting for an ambulance will make it take longer to get help, but ambulance crews can start providing care as soon as they arrive. They can get the patient to hospital quickly, and more safely.

Call 911:

- If person is unconsciousness (non-responsive)
- Has difficulty breathing, has shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Drinks or has eaten something poisonous
- Has sudden numbness
- Not being able to move
- If skin color is pale or blue
- Allergic reaction
- Has taken too much medication
- Change in mental status (such as unusual behavior, confusion or difficulty moving)
- Bleeding that won't stop
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Coughing up or vomiting blood
- Suicidal or homicidal or homicidal feelings
- Once 911 has been called
- Stay on the line with 911 and follow emergency instructions.
- Stay calm and try to keep the person calm.
- Don't move a person who was injured in an automobile accident or fall, or who was found unconscious.
- If the person is cold, cover them with a blanket.
- Don't give an injured person anything to eat or drink (unless instructed by the 911 dispatcher).
- Have someone watch for the ambulance and show the crew how to get to the person. (This is especially important in an apartment or office building, or if your address is hard to see from the street).

Stopping bleeding

Having a list of conditions for when to call 911 is good, but it's much better to know how to recognize an emergency no matter what the complaint is. If you've ever walked along a stream or a canal, you may have noticed that debris and algae tend to collect in places where the water doesn't flow very fast. In places where the river or stream runs quickly, nothing gathers.

Bleeding is similar. In a wound from which blood is flowing freely, clots are unlikely to form. The rush of blood out of the hole doesn't allow the platelets any time to stick together.

To help a clot form and bleeding to stop, we have to slow the flow down. We do this in four ways: pressure on the wound, elevation, pressure points and tourniquets

Direct pressure: slows blood flow at the site of the injury and might even stop it completely. If so, you have a perfect situation for clotting to start.

Elevation: (raising the wound above the heart) slows blood flow simply because it's harder to flow uphill than downhill.

Tourniquets: **This should only be done if instructed by emergency personnel.** This slows everything to a trickle downstream. The problem with tourniquets is that they cut

off blood flow to everything downstream of the tourniquet and that can cause problems later if you don't get the tourniquet off in time.

Checking for a pulse:

You can check a person's pulse by putting two fingers on the inside of their wrist or on their neck.

To measure the pulse in someone's wrist:

- hold the person's arm so it's straight, with the palm of their hand facing upwards
- place your index (first finger) and middle fingers on their wrist, at the base of their thumb
- using a clock or watch that counts seconds, count how many beats you feel in a minute, or count them over 30 seconds and multiply the number by two to work how many beats a minute
- if you can't find their pulse, try moving your fingers around a bit and pressing a little harder

To measure the pulse in someone's neck:

- place your index and middle fingers on the side of their neck, in the soft hollow area just beside their windpipe
- using a clock or watch that counts seconds, count how many beats you feel in a minute, or count them over 30 seconds and multiply the number by two to work how many beats a minute
- if you can't find their pulse, try moving your fingers around a bit
- A normal resting heart rate for an adult is 60-100 beats per minute. However, this can vary, depending on things such as age, stress levels, fitness and any medication the person is taking.

OPEN THE AIRWAY

- Place one hand on the forehead and gently tilt the head back.
- Remove any obvious obstructions from the person mouth, including dislodged dentures, but leave well-fitting dentures in place.
- Place the fingertips of two fingers under the point of the person chin and lift the chin. If injury to the neck is suspected, handle the head very gently and try to avoid tilting the head too much.
For a baby, use only one finger to lift the chin and take particular care not to over tilt the head.
- **Check for Breathing:** Once the airway is open, the next priority is to check whether or not the person is breathing. Keep the airway open with one hand on the forehead and one hand lifting the chin. Put your cheek to the person face and look down the chest.
- **LOOK** for the movement of the chest and stomach.
- **LISTEN** for breath sounds.
- Feeling for breathing on the side of your face.
- If the person is breathing, turn into the recovery position.
- If the person is not breathing
- Call 911 for emergency help.
- If you have not already done so, make sure that an ambulance has been called.