

# A Primer on Emergency Care

**T**he first few minutes after an injury or medical crisis occurs are frequently the most important.

The American College of Emergency Physicians has identified the following warning signs of a medical emergency:

- Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath
- Chest or upper abdominal pain or pressure
- Fainting, sudden dizziness, weakness
- Changes in vision
- Confusion or changes in mental status
- Any sudden or severe pain
- Uncontrolled bleeding
- Severe or persistent vomiting or diarrhea
- Coughing or vomiting blood
- Suicidal or homicidal feelings

Review this list with your physician and ask whether there are other warning signs you should watch for, because other factors, such as previous medical problems, may be important. In addition, ask when you should call the doctor's office vs. go straight to an emergency department or call an ambulance. Find out what you should do when the doctor's office is closed.



## WHEN TO CALL 911

Always call EMS if the victim needs immediate medical treatment. To make this decision, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the victim's condition life-threatening?
- Could the victim's condition worsen and become life-threatening on the way to the hospital?
- Does the victim require the skills or equipment of paramedics or emergency medical technicians?
- Could the distance or traffic conditions cause a delay in getting the victim to the hospital?

If your answer to any of these questions is "yes," or if you are unsure, it is best to call EMS.

Paramedics and emergency medical technicians can begin medical treatments at the scene and on the way to the hospital and alert the emergency department of your condition en route.

When you call for help, speak calmly and clearly. Give your name, address and phone number; give the location of the victim; and describe the problem. Don't hang up until the dispatcher tells you to, because he or she may need more information or need to give you instructions.

## CHOOSING AN EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

If you or a member of your family has a potentially life-threatening emergency, call EMS and the ambulance will take you to the nearest emergency department capable of treating the condition. For conditions that are not life-threatening, you may have several nearby emergency departments from which to choose. Your choice (which you should plan before you need emergency care) should be based on several factors:

- **Doctor's recommendation.** Your physician may recommend an emergency department based on his or her staff privileges, knowledge of the staff or familiarity with its capabilities.
- **Staffing.** It used to be common for emergency departments to be staffed by physicians without any specialized training. Today, emergency departments are staffed by specialists, many of whom are board-certified in

emergency medicine or who are full-time, career emergency physicians. In any case, emergency departments are staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Other specialties, such as cardiologists, orthopedic surgeons and pediatricians, should be on call in case they are needed. Specialty back-up varies from hospital to hospital.

- **Pediatric capabilities.** If you have children, make sure the emergency

department you choose has the right size and type of equipment for pediatric needs. If the physicians and nurses are not emergency specialists, find out what kinds of pediatric emergency training they have. Also make sure the hospital has pediatricians on call.

- **Options listed by your health plan.** Check the provisions of your health plan regarding emergency care coverage.

For more information or materials from the American College of Emergency Physicians, go to [www.acep.org](http://www.acep.org) or call (800) 320-0610, ext. 3006