

WHEN TO CALL AN AMBULANCE

In a medical emergency, calling for an ambulance could mean the difference between life and death. However, people sometimes hesitate to call because they are not sure if the situation qualifies as an emergency. If in doubt, always call 911. The people who take your call are trained to help you and will direct the appropriate resources to you.

Recognizing a medical emergency

You should always call 911 for an ambulance for:

- An unconscious person – who doesn't wake or respond when shaken
- A heart attack (suspected) – pain in the chest, especially if it is crushing or like indigestion and lasts more than five minutes. The pain may spread to the arms and jaw
- Breathing difficulty – especially if the person is unable to speak more than a few words or has blue lips or mouth
- Abdominal pain – if it is severe and undiagnosed
- Bleeding – any major uncontrolled bleeding or any bleeding that does not stop after at least 10 minutes of continuous pressure
- Back pain (severe) – after a fall or after sudden onset of back pain if the person is over 50 years of age
- Burns – which are bigger than the size of a hand or cause severe pain that is not relieved with simple pain-relieving medications, or if the person has difficulty breathing
- Choking – especially if the person is unable to talk, cry or breathe
- Convulsions or fitting – or if the person has no history of convulsions (such as epilepsy or brain injury)
- Drowning, near-drowning, diving or scuba accident
- Stroke (possible) – especially if the person experiences numbness, loss of function of hand, arm or leg, slurred speech, facial droop or severe abrupt headache
- Headache (severe) – not the usual kind, with or without loss of function of arm or leg
- A motor vehicle accident – if you think someone has been injured
- An industrial accident – where a person is injured or trapped
- Vaginal bleeding (severe) – with possible or confirmed pregnancy
- A suicide attempt
- Pain (severe) after a fall or injury – when the person is unable to sit up, stand or walk
- A drug overdose or poisoning – whether you know for sure or just suspect an overdose
- Diabetes – if the person is not fully awake or not behaving normally
- An allergic reaction – especially with difficulty breathing or loss of consciousness
- Electrical shock – of any kind
- Trauma (injury) – if it is severe, especially to the head, neck, chest or abdomen – for example, if the person was stabbed, shot or impaled, or hit by or ran into an object
- Meningococcal disease – if symptoms indicate possible infection
- Hypothermia or heat stress – particularly if the person is collapsed or has an altered conscious state.

Calling 911 when unsure

Remember, if you are not sure that what is happening is a real emergency, you can always phone for an ambulance and they will come and assess the situation. Ambulance crew can always attend, assess and not transport a person if they do not require further emergency treatment.

Should You Drive or Call an Ambulance?

If you answer "yes" to any of the following questions about a person experiencing a medical emergency, or if you are unsure, it's best to call an ambulance, even if you think you can get to the hospital faster by driving yourself.

- Does the person's condition appear life-threatening?
- Could the person's condition worsen and become life-threatening on the way to the hospital?
- Could moving the person cause further injury?
- Does the person need the skills or equipment employed by paramedics or emergency medical technicians?
- Would distance or traffic conditions cause a delay in getting the person to the hospital?

Benefits of emergency transportation

Calling an ambulance has many benefits over driving to the hospital on your own. Ambulances are staffed with Emergency Medical Technicians who are:

- Trained in handling medical emergencies
- Able to provide medical attention en-route to the hospital
- Prepared to handle the situation if it worsens
- Able to navigate through traffic much more quickly
- Able to communicate with the hospital during transport
- Aware of the best route to the hospital
- Aware of road conditions and traffic