

# HCQU CARES

MAY 2025

**MEDICAL EMERGENCIES:**  
Minutes Matter!





“Time is tissue” is the anthem in emergency care, but what does that mean? Ask any emergency medical provider what tissue means to them, and you might get several answers: tissue of the heart, brain, intestine, skin, blood, nerve, bone, or any number of organs. Regardless of the definition of tissue, the first word of the saying – **time** – is the most important factor. **Every minute that emergency care is delayed results in vital tissue dying.**

Identifying a medical emergency and getting emergency care as soon as possible can prevent irreversible damage or even death!

Some medical emergencies can be difficult to recognize.

Caregivers can take the following actions to prepare to handle medical emergencies effectively as they arise:

- Be trained on recognizing signs of a medical emergency
- Get to know the individuals supported to identify signs of distress in each person
- Regularly review the agency’s emergency policies, which include calling 911 **immediately** in an emergency
- Learn CPR and first aid

“Time is tissue”. Identifying and responding appropriately to a medical emergency might save the life and/or preserve the functionality of one or more individuals in your care.

*Call 911 in a Medical Emergency. In an Emergency, Act Without Delay!*, an Office of Developmental Programs health alert, is available for download at: <https://www.paproviders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023-ODP-Health-Alert-04-19-2023-CALL-911-IN-A-MEDICAL-EMERGENCY.pdf>



## EDUCATION IS KEY

The Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) defines a medical emergency as: “Any event that threatens someone’s life or limb in such a way that immediate medical care is needed to prevent death or serious impairment of health, such as severe pain, serious injury, serious illness or a medical condition that is quickly getting worse” (Office of Developmental Programs, 2023). The words *serious*, *severe*, and *quickly* are essential to this definition. Understanding the difference between medical conditions that can be treated by a caregiver or an office visit with the primary care physician and medical emergencies that require immediate care is not always as easy as one might think.

Imagine an individual in your care is helping to prepare dinner and cuts a finger with a knife. Is this a medical emergency? Whether the injury is treatable with an adhesive bandage or requires an emergency hospital visit depends on how deep the cut is. However, if the person suddenly starts hitting their chest and gasping for breath, it is a medical emergency, and emergency protocol should be started immediately.

How do you know when to call 911 and what to do after you make the call? Education is a great starting point. The HCQU's *Emergency Care: When to Seek* training reviews over 20 incidents that may be considered emergencies, including special considerations for individuals with an intellectual disability/autism (ID/A) who may not be able to verbally explain why they need medical help. The training is available as an online training or may be scheduled as an instructor-led session; visit <https://hcqu.acentra.com/> to learn more.

In an emergency, immediate treatment is critical. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and basic first aid training teaches best practice methods for chest compressions and other basic first aid skills. Participants who complete the training are prepared to provide urgent care until trained emergency personnel arrive.

When someone stops breathing, they will lose consciousness, and their heart will stop beating. The best practice while waiting for emergency responders to arrive is to initiate CPR. If no one trained in CPR is available, 911 operators are prepared to communicate step-by-step instructions through the phone. "If you are afraid to do CPR or unsure how to perform CPR correctly, know that it's always better to try than to do nothing at all. The difference between doing something and doing nothing could save someone's life." (Mayo Clinic, 2024). Most caregiving agencies require CPR and basic first aid training and might provide it for caregivers they employ. For people seeking this training independently, the American Heart Association and the American Red Cross are organizations that offer the training in southwestern Pennsylvania. Visit the following websites for more information:

- American Heart Association: <https://cpr.heart.org/en/>
- American Red Cross: [https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class?utm\\_source=RCO&utm\\_medium=RCO\\_Navigation\\_Training\\_Certification](https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class?utm_source=RCO&utm_medium=RCO_Navigation_Training_Certification)



## ACT IMMEDIATELY - DO NOT DELAY!

If you are unsure if a situation is a medical emergency, always err on the side of caution. If you feel an ambulance is needed, call 911 immediately and initiate an emergency response. Do not wait for approval to activate 911; anyone who needs to know can be informed of the situation afterward.

## REFERENCES

- Cherpes, G. (2023, April 19). Health Alert: Call 911 in a Medical Emergency. Retrieved on February 14, 2025, from <https://www.paproviders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023-ODP-Health-Alert-04-19-2023-CALL-911-IN-A-MEDICAL-EMERGENCY.pdf>
- Mayo Clinic. (2024, July 18). Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR): First aid. Retrieved February 12, 2025, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/first-aid/first-aid-cpr/basics/art-20056600>

## TIPS FOR CALLING 911

Upon encountering an emergency, adrenaline rises; it can be difficult to concentrate and focus on what needs done and in what order. The following guidelines are helpful when you need to call 911:

- Remain calm and stay with the individual
- State your name and phone number to the operator
- State the exact location/address and possible landmarks to facilitate a quick arrival
- Report the type of incident/emergency, how serious it is, and the number of people involved
- Report on each person's age along with any medical history you know
- Be prepared to answer questions, such as whether the person conscious or breathing
- Report barriers that could prevent Emergency Medical Service (EMS) from providing care, such as stairs, extreme obesity, or isolation status
- Report any unsafe road conditions or detours known in the area to aid EMS in a quick safe arrival
- Wait calmly with the individual until EMS arrives and follow any instructions given by the 911 operator

## REFERENCE

- Acentra Health Care Quality Unit (HCQU). (2024, March) Emergency Care: When to Seek-Training. Retrieved February 12, 2025, from [hcqu.acentra.com](https://hcqu.acentra.com)

## PRACTICE SCENARIOS

Imagine you are the caregiver in the following situations to answer the questions:

Dan is diagnosed with cerebral palsy. He and his caregiver decided to go to the mall. While at the mall, Dan walked around looking through different stores on the top level. After a short rest, he wanted to go to the lower floor. Because Dan has practiced going up and down stairs with minimal assistance in physical therapy, he decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator. Prior to stepping down, Dan's caregiver said, "Watch your step" and offered to assist him. Dan approached the stairs and attempted to take a step without assistance. He stumbled, fell down 5 stairs, and hit his head. The caregiver rushed to his side and found Dan unconscious. The caregiver called 911. Two minutes later Dan woke up and asked, "What happened?"

1. Is there a medical emergency in this situation?

*Yes*

2. What makes you think that?

*Dan fell down the stairs, hit his head, and was unconscious.*

3. What factors indicate the possibility of a medical emergency?

*Any type of fall with a head injury is a medical emergency.*

4. Was 911 called at the appropriate time?

*Yes, 911 was called immediately after the fall.*



Susan has mild ID. She attends a day program 4 days a week. Every morning, Susan uses the restroom and occasionally reports constipation. In the past, she was diagnosed with hemorrhoids. Recently, she went to the doctor due to an increase in constipation. She was prescribed medications and told to watch for any major changes. On Monday at her day program, Susan reported belly pain twice. Her caregivers did not think anything of it because of her history of constipation. On Tuesday, Susan mentioned pain again and stated she had a few drops of blood mixed in with her stool. Caregivers did not mention it in the daily notes because it was not a major change from Susan's baseline with her prior hemorrhoids. The events at the day program were reported to Susan's residential caregivers when they picked her up. None of the caregivers were alarmed by Susan's symptoms as she frequently experienced constipation and hemorrhoids. That evening, Susan decided to go to bed early. Caregivers thought Susan was tired from her daily activities and did not think much of it. On Wednesday, Susan decided to stay home from her usual activities, saying her belly hurt. A few hours later she went to use the restroom. Caregivers heard a loud sound and rushed to her. Susan was passed out in the bathroom, and there was a large amount of blood in the toilet. Caregivers called 911 immediately.

1. Is there a medical emergency in this situation?

Yes

2. What makes you think that?

*Caregivers heard a loud sound, and Susan was found passed out in the bathroom with blood in the toilet.*

3. What factors indicate the possibility of a medical emergency?

*Susan is unconscious and there is a large amount of blood in the toilet.*

4. Was 911 called at the appropriate time?

*Yes, 911 was called immediately. However, there were signs leading up to the medical emergency. Susan's statements about not feeling well and the blood in her stool earlier in the week were warning signs of bigger issues. Recognizing her baseline and monitoring stool after medication changes are primary concerns. Any changes from a baseline, especially after medication adjustments, MUST be reported. If continuing pain and blood in the stool had been reported to the doctor sooner, the condition might have been treated and not continued to worsen.*



It was a hot sunny day. Jeremy, his brother, and his caregiver went to the park for the afternoon. At the park, Jeremy and his brother were running and playing. Eventually, Jeremy went to his caregiver and said he had a headache and was thirsty. His cheeks were red, and he was covered in sweat. Jeremy's caregiver suggested a break from running. Jeremy sat down for a few moments with his brother and took some small sips of water. Jeremy and his brother decided to go on the swings. While on the swings, Jeremy was not keeping up with his brother. He said he was not feeling well. While swinging, he fell out of his seat but did not pass out. His brother and caregiver rushed over to his side. The caregiver called his supervisor to find out what to do; the supervisor instructed the caregiver to call 911.

1. Is there a medical emergency in this situation?

Yes

2. What makes you think that?

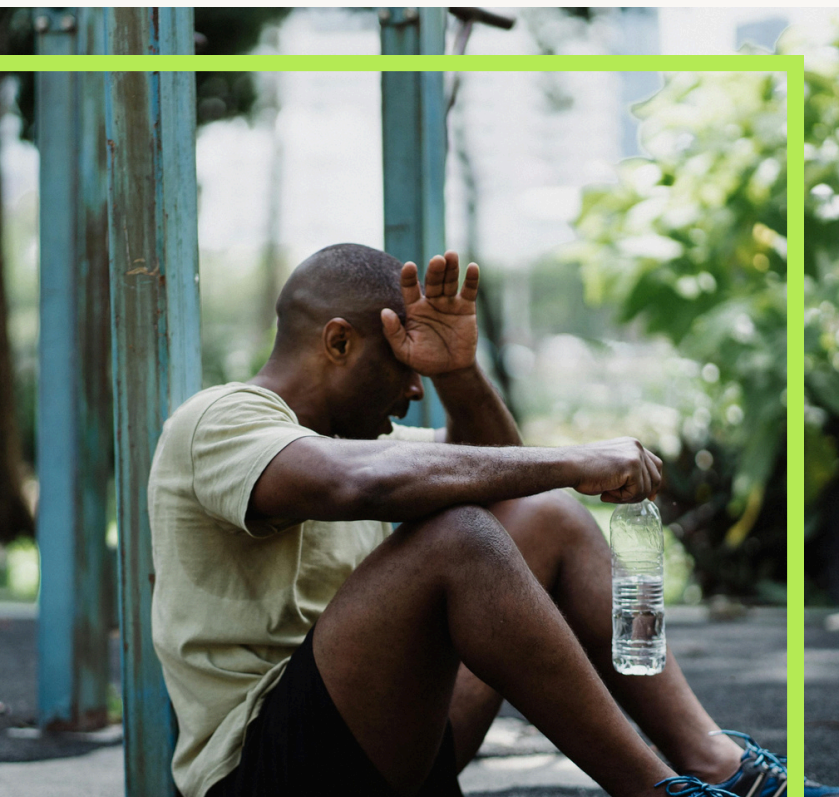
*Jeremy showed signs of heat stroke. The signs of heat stroke include feeling unwell, being flushed, sweating, dizziness, and confusion. These should prompt concern and further evaluation.*

3. What factors indicate the possibility of a medical emergency?

*Jeremy said he was not feeling well, only took a brief rest period, he was no longer keeping up with his brother, then he fell from a swing.*

4. Was 911 called at the appropriate time?

*No, 911 should have been called prior to calling the supervisor. Jeremy had signs of heat stroke. He only rested for a short period of time before being less energetic than his brother and falling from the swing. Recognizing these symptoms as a medical emergency would have caused the caregiver to call 911 sooner.*



These scenarios demonstrate that knowing when to call emergency services depends on a caregiver's ability to identify an emergency and take immediate action. In other situations, the signs of an emergency might not be as obvious. When people are ill and do not appear to get better, it is good to seek medical care right away, especially if there is danger of losing life or limb or if the person has a condition that can worsen quickly or needs care or equipment that can only be provided by EMS personnel. If you are not sure what the person needs, call 911. **Minutes matter** when protecting a person's health and safety.



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