Neurological Emergencies

Strokes are common neurological emergencies that require immediate response and proper care for optimal recovery. A stroke occurs when a blood clot blocks an artery or a blood vessel breaks. These episodes interrupt blood flow to the brain, brain cells die and brain damage occurs.

The National Stroke Association reports that stroke is the third leading cause of death in America and the No. 1 cause of adult disability. However, up to 80 percent of strokes are preventable, the association says. Call 911 immediately if you or someone near you suddenly has the following symptoms occur:

- numbness or weakness of face, arm or leg—especially on one side of the body
- confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- difficulty walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- a severe, unyielding headache with no known cause

The American Heart Association advises that the onset of stroke is not a death sentence. In fact, more than 5.8 million stroke survivors are alive today. Receiving emergency care is crucial to recovery. In fact, during treatment blood clot-dissolving drugs can be administered to stop a stroke in progress and reduce disability. However, this therapy must be administered in the first three hours of symptom onset; therefore it is imperative you seek help immediately.

An Ounce of Prevention

While emergencies are unexpected, there are things you can do now that will save valuable time when a crisis arises. Create first aid kits for your home and vehicle, and keep emergency phone numbers for your doctor, family and friends in your purse or wallet. Also note any drug allergies or serious medical conditions you may have, and include the names of your prescription medications. Some individuals add an ICE (In Case of Emergency) listing to their cell phone contacts list.

Remember, more than 300,000 people are treated in U.S. emergency departments each day, the American College of Emergency Physicians reports. Equipping yourself with basic healthcare knowledge can lead to the best possible outcomes for yourselves and others.

Minutes Matter in Medical Emergencies

The second a life-threatening illness or injury occurs, the clock starts ticking on the “golden hour,” the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports. The phrase is a term used by emergency crews to acknowledge that the first 60 minutes of an illness or injury can mean the difference between life and death.

It’s critical to call 911 immediately if someone’s life is in danger. Depending on the type of illness or injury, you can also possibly improve outcomes by gathering critical information and performing essential care before paramedics arrive.

Cardiovascular Emergencies

Each year, more than 300,000 people in the United States experience cardiac arrest away from the hospital, the NIH reports. However, only about five percent of these patients survive long enough to recover and eventually leave a hospital alive.

A recent study by the Resuscitation Outcomes Consortium reviewed data from 10,000 cases of cardiac arrest that were reported to 911. The study revealed that more lives were saved when bystanders took immediate action by giving cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and a shock from a battery-powered defibrillator (AED).

Portale defibrillators are available in airports, shopping malls, stadiums and other public places. AEDs are equipped with an audio and visual display that provides step-by-step instructions to the user. Each year, AEDs save lives on planes, trains, buses, stadiums, offices, athletic fields and beaches.

AEDs are portable devices that have a small, lightweight, handheld case that contains a single-use battery-powered defibrillator (AED). AEDs speak to the user and offer step-by-step instructions on how to safely and effectively use the device. The American Heart Association recommends that bystanders only perform chest-compression CPR for someone in cardiac arrest. Giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation interrupts chest compressions for too long and may worsen outcomes.

While some heart attacks are sudden and intense, most cardiac emergencies start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort, the American Heart Association reports. Sometimes people are not sure what's wrong and they wait too long before getting help. Signs of a heart attack include:

- chest discomfort—discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes and goes away and comes back
- cold sweats
- general discomfort—pain or discomfort in the arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach
- nausea
- light-headedness

The American Heart Association reports that while the most common heart attack symptoms are chest pain or discomfort, women are more likely than men to experience less obvious symptoms such as shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

Source: National Institutes of Health

When to Call 911

Signs of a medical emergency:

- Uncontrolled bleeding
- New or sudden difficulty breathing
- New chest or upper abdominal pain or pressure
- Loss of consciousness
- Unexplained seizures or convulsions
- Sudden dizziness, weakness or change in vision

Source: National Institutes of Health

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Dr. Kapur has designed and taught emergency medicine training programs for international physicians, nurses and primary healthcare workers. He has also worked on the development of emergency healthcare systems in low- and middle-income countries with an emphasis on low-cost, high-yield strategies for patients with acute medical conditions. Through his work, he has collaborated with partners in the Middle East, South America, Africa, India, China and Eastern Europe.

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