



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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### Office of Integrated Health Health & Safety Information

## The Importance of Calling 911

According to the American Heart Association, only 46% of the 250,000 people who experience out-of-hospital cardiac arrest in the U.S. each year get immediate help before a professional arrives.

**“Emergency Medical Services, more commonly known as EMS, is a system that provides emergency medical care. Once it is activated by an incident that causes serious illness or injury, the focus of EMS is emergency medical care of the patient(s)” (<https://www.ems.gov>)**

Within an EMS system, a number of trained professionals act in concert when responding to emergencies. For example, 911 operators may help identify a cardiac arrest, dispatch the appropriate providers and provide instruction regarding immediate care (such as beginning CPR). They will also direct transport to the most appropriate medical facility.

For certain life-threatening medical emergencies, such as heart attack, stroke, trouble breathing, choking, severe bleeding, every minute of delay results in a negative impact on mortality. This is particularly true for the first five minutes when a quick response makes the greatest difference. The American Heart Association (AHA) states that survival rates for cardiac arrest patients falls 7-10% for every untreated minute (Link, M. S. et al.)

The Chain of Survival provides a framework for improving survival outcomes. This alert focuses on the most important link of that framework, the first link of the Chain of Survival: **early recognition of a life-threatening situation, which should prompt an immediate call to 911.** Once the 911 call is made, dispatchers are trained to recognize the possibility of a cardiac arrest and will instruct the caller to provide compression-only CPR, unless the caller is already trained in conventional CPR.

## The Chain of Survival



The first person (also known as the first responder) that recognizes the individual is in distress should initiate critical first aid and/or CPR. The first responder can be a friend, a caregiver, a professional, a bystander or anyone else who initiates a 911 call and receives instructions from 911 operators over the phone while waiting for EMS to arrive to the scene. “CPR performed before EMS arrival was associated with a 30-day survival rate after an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest that was more than twice as high as that associated with no CPR before EMS arrival” (Hasselqvist-Ax, Riva & Herlitz, 2015, p. 2307). Research shows that initiating CPR doubles the chance of survival.

To be clear, it is not the responsibility of the **first person/first responder** to attempt to diagnose or determine why an individual is in distress. The first person/first responder’s primary responsibility is to call 911 as quickly as possible. The first person/first responder who recognizes an individual is in distress should never delay a call to 911 **FOR ANY REASON. A call to a primary care physician, a supervisor, etc. is NOT the first priority.**

**Therefore, it is important when we discuss health and safety, that we stress the importance of calling 911 as quickly as possible in order to eliminate preventable deaths that may be attributed to caregiver delays.**



Examples of when to call 911 include:

- ✓ When an individual is unresponsive or displays any lack of responsiveness
- ✓ When an individual is having trouble breathing
- ✓ When an individual is having chest pain
- ✓ When an individual (who typically can move) is unable to move
- ✓ When an individual has severe bleeding not stopped by gentle pressure
- ✓ When an individual is choking
- ✓ When an individual (who can typically ambulate), cannot bear weight (stand)
- ✓ When an individual has excessive swelling to any area of their body or any limb (legs, arms, etc.) after a fall (Mayo Clinic, 2019 a,b)



## **The American Red Cross (2019) describes the following procedures for the initial responder in their curriculums:**

### **If the person appears unresponsive:**

Shout to get the person's attention, using the person's name if it is known. If there is no response, tap the person's shoulder (if the person is an adult or child) or the bottom of the person's foot (if the person is an infant) and shout again, while checking for normal breathing. Check for responsiveness and breathing for no more than 5-10 seconds.

### **If the person is breathing:**

- Send someone to call 911 or the designated emergency number and obtain an AED and first aid kit.
- Proceed with gathering information from bystanders using the SAMPLE questions.
- Conduct a head-to-toe check.
- Roll the person onto his or her side into a recovery position if there are no obvious signs of injury.

### **If the person is NOT breathing:**

- Send someone to call 911 or the designated emergency number and obtain an AED and first aid kit.
- Ensure that the person is face-up on a firm, flat surface such as the floor or ground.
- Begin CPR (starting with compressions) or use an AED if one is immediately available, if you are trained in giving CPR and using an AED.
- Continue administering CPR until the person exhibits signs of life, such as breathing, an AED becomes available, or EMS or trained medical responders arrive on scene. *Note: End CPR if the scene becomes unsafe or you cannot continue due to exhaustion.*

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## ***Finally... When should you Call 911?***

**You should call 911 if someone has a life-threatening emergency or is in immediate danger.**

**If you're not sure call anyway!!!**

**The 911 operator will decide if you are having an emergency.**

### **When calling 911**

Your call will be directed to a 911 call center.

The operator will ask you several questions. By answering the operator's questions, they can determine what type of emergency you are having.

Examples of questions the operator will ask:

- "What is the emergency?"
- "What is happening?"
- "Where are you?"
- "Who needs help?"
- "Who is with you?"
- "What is your address and phone number?"

Try to stay calm, take a deep breath and answer the operator's questions clearly. Talk normally, not too fast, so the operator can get the information needed to send the right kind of help.

The 911 operator will dispatch the right responders to your location.

The operator will tell you what to do until help arrives. You should follow the operator's instructions.

For example:

- Perform life saving measures for choking
- Provide first aid
- Perform CPR

If you do not understand something the operator said, ask them to explain or repeat the instructions.

Always hang up last.

**Do Not hang up  
unless the 911 operator hangs up!!**

## After calling 911, what should you do?

- 1) Inform team members who support the individual as soon as possible.

*For example,*

- The Agency Administrator
  - The Group Home Manager
  - The Primary Care Provider
  - The Support Coordinator
  - The Day Support or other programs
  - Family or legal guardian
- 2) Report the event in the incident reporting system for your agency and the state as appropriate.

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