

## Emergencies - 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 triple zero (000) or 112 (as a secondary emergency number from your mobile phone in Australia). The people who take your call are trained to help you and will direct you to the appropriate resources.

It is a good idea to take a first aid course so that you can recognise a medical emergency and administer effective first aid until medical help arrives.

### What is a medical emergency?

Always call triple zero (000) for an ambulance in the following circumstances:

- **Unconscious person** – who doesn't wake or respond when shaken.
- **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 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** – that is severe and undiagnosed.
- **Haemorrhages** – major uncontrolled bleeding.
- **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 over 50 years of age.
- **Burns** – which are bigger than the size of a hand and/or cause severe pain that is not relieved with simple painkillers, or if the person has difficulty breathing.
- **Choking** – especially if the person is unable to talk, cry or breathe.
- **Convulsions or fitting** – or if they have no history of convulsions (for example 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.
- **Motor vehicle accidents** – if you think someone has been injured.
- **Industrial accidents** – where a person is injured or trapped.
- **Vaginal bleeding (severe)** – with possible or confirmed pregnancy.
- **Suicide attempt.**
- **Pain (severe) after a fall or injury** – when the person is unable to sit up, stand or walk.
- **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.
- **Allergic reaction** – especially with difficulty breathing or loss of consciousness.
- **Electrical shock** – of any kind.
- **Trauma (injury)** – which 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** – which is severe.

### If you're not sure, call anyway

Remember, if you are unsure that what is happening is a real emergency, you can always phone for an ambulance and they will come and assess the situation. Ambulance paramedics can always attend, assess and then leave the person at home if they **do not** require further emergency treatment.

## If it's not urgent, see your doctor

For non-urgent care, or patient transport, contact your local doctor. Ambulance paramedics cannot prescribe medication. Your local doctor is the best person to treat non-urgent medical conditions.

## How to call triple zero (000) or 112 (if your mobile is out of phone range or credit)

Once you have decided that the situation is a medical emergency, you will need to call triple zero (000) or 112 and ask for an ambulance. You should:

- **Get to a fixed telephone** – if you are providing first aid to the injured person, ask someone else to make the call. Use a fixed or pay telephone. Triple zero (000) is a free call (even from a pay phone).
- **Call out for help if you are by yourself** – if no one responds, you may have to leave the injured person briefly to call for an ambulance. It is important to phone for an ambulance as quickly as possible to get the ambulance on the way.

## What to expect during the call

Try not to panic. Talk slowly and clearly. If you talk too quickly, you may waste time repeating yourself. The typical call will involve:

- The person who first answers the triple zero (000) (or 112) call is a Telstra operator. Tell them you need an ambulance. They will transfer you to an ambulance call taker.
- You will be asked to give the phone number you are calling from and the address where the injured or sick person is. If you are located on a country property, you will need to know your property fire map reference or VicRoads map reference.
- You will be asked to describe the problem. You will be asked about the nature of the emergency, the number of people involved, the injured or ill person's gender and age, and whether or not they are conscious or breathing. This information helps to determine the seriousness of the problem and what resources are required.
- While you are answering questions, an ambulance dispatcher will send out an emergency ambulance. You will not hear the dispatcher doing this, but don't be concerned, continue to answer the questions. All the information you provide is relayed to the ambulance paramedics on their way to the emergency. This allows them to prepare before they arrive.
- The call taker may give you first aid instructions over the phone.
- Please do not hang up until the call taker tells you that you can.
- If possible, have someone waiting outside to flag down the ambulance. If it is dark, put on an outside light.

## You can ask for an interpreter

If you do not speak English or prefer to speak in your native language, you can ask for an interpreter. When the call taker starts asking you questions in English, you need to ask for an interpreter. There will be a short wait while the call taker gets an interpreter on the line to talk to you.

Ask for an interpreter straight away if the sick person is in a life-threatening situation. Try to learn the words 'unconscious', 'not breathing' and 'bleeding' in English and say this when you ring up – before they get the interpreter to ask further questions. This allows them to send an ambulance immediately.

## Callers with speech or hearing impairments

If you have a speech or hearing impairment and use a telephone typewriter (TTY), PC or modem to make telephone calls, you can call for an ambulance by dialling '106'. This puts you through to the text-based National Relay Emergency Call Service. The operator who answers your call relays your typed information to the ambulance call taker (or police or fire services).

## If you call triple zero (000) or 112 (from a mobile phone) but cannot speak

If you call triple zero (000) or 112 (from a mobile phone) but cannot speak or make any sounds, the operator will prompt you to dial '55'. The police will either try to call back or send a car to the caller's address to check the situation. If you don't dial 55 when requested, the operator disconnects your call. This system prevents accidental phone calls from unlocked mobile phones.

## First aid courses

It is strongly recommended that you take a first aid course, so you can recognise a medical emergency and administer first aid until the ambulance paramedics arrive to take over. Your quick and effective action could mean the difference between life and death for the injured person. For more information on first aid courses, contact the Metropolitan Ambulance Service or St John Ambulance Australia.

## Where to get help

- Always call an ambulance in a medical emergency – call triple zero (000)
- National Relay Emergency Call Service (for text-based communication over the phone) Tel. '106'
- First aid courses and kits – Ambulance Victoria Tel. 1800 248 859
- First aid courses and kits – St John Ambulance Victoria Tel. (03) 9696 0000

## Things to remember

- Some people hesitate to call for an ambulance because they are not sure if the situation is a medical emergency – if in doubt, call triple zero (000).
- Give an accurate location so the ambulance gets to the injured or ill person as soon as possible.
- Do not hang up the phone until the ambulance call taker tells you to.
- It's a good idea to do a first aid course so you can recognise a medical emergency and administer first aid until the ambulance paramedics arrive.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Ambulance Victoria

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