



## Hurry! It's an Emergency!

Or is it? Contrary to what we see on popular television shows, you don't have to be hanging precariously by one hand from a burning building in order to be experiencing an emergency. According to the dictionary, an emergency is "a sudden and urgent occasion for action." It can include natural disaster, bodily injury, or any situation that requires an immediate response from those who can help those in need.

What are some situations that constitute an emergency? There are many – but here are a few descriptions of the most common:

### Medical Emergencies

These vary in range and nature, but in general call for emergency help if you notice that an adult or child:

1. Stops breathing, experiences difficulty breathing, starts to turn blue or is unconscious.
2. Has severe chest or head pain.
3. Is experiencing a high fever with excessive vomiting.
4. Has a deep wound and is bleeding badly.
5. Has a serious eye or ear injury.
6. Has a serious burn – defined as burns of any degree over a substantial percentage of the body or any third degree burns.
7. Has a suspected broken bone, or
8. Has swallowed a poisonous substance or has been bitten by a poisonous insect, animal or snake.

### Disaster Emergencies

1. Another emergency involves suspected fire or a carbon monoxide threat in your home or that of others. If any of the smoke detectors in your home should sound or you should see signs of fire or smoke, evacuate the premises immediately and then call for emergency assistance. If a carbon monoxide detector should sound in your home, do not hesitate to evacuate everyone from the building and then call for help. Carbon monoxide is a silent and deadly gas that can overtake you without warning – even while you wait for your call to be answered.
2. The same is true for a suspected gas leak in your home. Even though the smell of natural gas can easily be detected and a leak located – the escaping gas can quickly ignite and explode without warning. Evacuate first, then call for help.
3. If you experience downed electrical lines, flooding, witness a tornado, or experience any severe weather condition where others may need to be notified or evacuated to safety, call emergency services immediately and inform the operator of the impending danger.
4. If you are a victim of any crime or witness a crime in progress, call for emergency help.
5. Be aware that because of increased automotive traffic and the subsequent rise in car crashes, many community and state authorities will not routinely respond to these calls with police assistance. Call for emergency help only in an incident in which someone has sustained injuries. Be sure to acquaint yourself with accident protocols in your state by contacting the Department of Motor Vehicles or public relations department of your local police department.

### Who Ya Gonna Call?

Once you understand what constitutes an emergency, determine if you have 9-1-1 service in your



area. Unfortunately, not all areas of the U.S. (mostly rural towns) have tax supported 911 phone service. Never assume that you have it. Check with your local phone company to see if it is available in your area. This information is also generally listed in the public information section of your current telephone book. If 911 service has not been established in your area, make sure that you know the phone numbers of the emergency departments who normally service 911 emergencies – such as the police or sheriff's department, fire department and local ambulance services.

Again, call 911 or the appropriate emergency service only when immediate response is needed to an accident, fire, serious illness or a crime. Occasionally people will call 911 during non-emergency situations such as to report a power outage. While it's true that a power outage seems like an emergency to you, your 911 or emergency service operator rarely has access to power resumption information. And contacting them for these type of calls takes the dispatcher away from their real job of saving lives.

### **Just the Facts, Please**

When you do call during a valid 911 emergency, remain calm and be prepared to answer the dispatchers' questions. Dispatchers need to gather specific information in order to respond properly to your emergency, so do not second-guess the logic of the questions they will ask.

In general, a 911 dispatcher needs to ascertain your exact location. On occasion, a 911 dispatcher will ask you for your name, address and phone number. Although they have systems such as the ALI/ANI systems (Automatic Location Information/Automatic Number Information) that will list the last known address assigned to the phone number from which you are calling, they cannot assume that the address that comes up on their screen is the correct one. You may have moved recently and taken your phone number with you to the phone service at your new address. You may be at a business that has a general number which covers several business offices/locations, or your address may have been entered incorrectly into the system itself. They may also request this information to focus the attention of the caller as well as to verify the accuracy of their screens. Never assume that they have your correct address and be willing to give it to them clearly and accurately if asked.

After determining your correct location, the 911 dispatcher will question you about the nature of your emergency. Be able to describe the situation you are experiencing in understandable terms in as clear and calm a fashion as possible. It is only by ascertaining the nature of the emergency that the dispatcher can give adequate instruction (how to administer CPR, for example) and dispatch the appropriate emergency personnel to you.

Once they have this information, they will enter it into the CAD system which interfaces with other emergency personnel systems and will dispatch the appropriate field units to the scene. The 911 dispatcher will then continue to track the call, staying on the line with you once the field units reach the scene and until they leave. They can then create a full record of the complete call.

### **Wrong Number? Don't Hang Up!**

Every day 911 operators experience what they call 911 hang-ups. These are calls where the caller just hangs up when the 911 operator answers the call. Upon receiving such calls, 911 operators will redial the phone number of the caller to ascertain the true nature of the call. In this instance, the operator must assume that the call for help was legitimate as they have no way of knowing whether the hang up was intentional or not. If there is no answer at the number, a police officer is dispatched to the scene to assess the situation and report back to the operator that it was indeed a hang up. If you find that you have called 911 by mistake, stay on the line and when the operator answers identify



the call as a mistake. The operator will then be able to conclude the call and move onto another emergency without wasting valuable time and resources on your call. Contrary to popular myth – it is not illegal to call 911 by mistake.

### **When It's Not an Emergency**

Occasionally we experience situations that, although serious, don't require immediate attention from emergency services. In these instances, it is best to have handy a few phone numbers from some of your local utility companies and services. Call the:

- Local gas company: To make a routine check of gas pipes and appliances. Not if you smell gas or suspect a gas leak – if that is the case, do not hesitate to call 911.
- Local phone company: To report downed lines or report interrupted service (consider cellular phone service to use in an emergency. Many cellular phone companies now offer inexpensive cellular phone packages designed for use only in an emergency.
- Local electric company: To report interrupted service and to get information concerning when service will be restored. If you experience downed electrical wires on your property, call 911.
- Municipal entities such as your local Public Works department, water department and animal control: To report problems with water mains and service, waste pick-up problems and to report nuisance animals. For animals that pose an immediate health threat, call 911.
- Your insurance company: To report damage to your home and property and facilitate claims.
- The local hospital or poison control center: To make non-emergency inquiries.
- Your veterinarian: To safeguard the fuzzy members of the family, know your vet's name and phone number as well as any emergency vet service that they may subscribe to. Know where your vet is located in case you need to take any injured or sick animal for emergency help yourself.

### **Be Prepared**

Knowing these phone numbers is useless if they are not made easily accessible to every member of the family. Teach small children to use the phone and how to dial 911. Post all emergency numbers in a central location in your home and make sure everyone knows where that is. Consider entering them into the speed dial function available on most current telephones, being sure to acquaint family members with their location within the speed dial system. Familiarize everyone with emergency phone use. Make sure that everyone in your family knows their address and phone number.

Sometimes the only thing that prevents an emergency from turning into a tragedy is preparedness. Have family safety drills for every dangerous eventuality. Learn and teach everyone basic first aid. It sounds simple enough, but too many people die every day because someone didn't know enough to offer appropriate help. Take the time now to learn what you need to know during an emergency and it could mean the difference between life and death for someone you love.

Make sure your house number is clearly marked and visible from the street during both day and night - do a curb check of your own to see that it is. Don't take your safety for granted. All the 911 operators in the world won't be able to get emergency personnel to you if they can't find you or your house. *It is estimated that every day thousands of people die needlessly because they could not get access to emergency assistance. Taking these easy steps to safeguard yourself and the ones you love significantly reduces the chance of your being one of them. And the next time you call for help in an emergency, you'll rest assured that someone who can help will be there to answer your call.*

*Copyright 2002 \* National Safety Council \* All Rights Reserved. Reviewed 5/05.*