

When Your Child Has an Emergency

Emergency care of children in America is better today than ever before. More than 30 million children each year receive acute and life-saving care in the nation's emergency departments. Today, emergency departments are staffed by emergency medicine specialists who provide the highest levels of care to patients of all ages.



Childhood Emergencies

Nothing is more terrifying to parents than when their child has a medical emergency. If your toddler swallows poison or your daughter starts choking, do you know what to do?

The American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) wants to help you recognize and respond to a medical emergency.

Preventing Emergencies



Parents can protect their children's health by providing good care and practicing injury prevention.

Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death in children 1-21 years of age. The most common injuries are those related to motor vehicles, drowning, fire and burns, suffocation, choking, unintentional firearm injuries, falls, and poisonings.

- If your child has a pediatrician or family physician, you've already taken the first step in preventing a medical emergency by providing preventive health care and treating minor illnesses before they become serious.
- If you don't have health insurance, you may be eligible for free or low-cost health insurance through the State Children's Health Insurance Program. To find out whether you're eligible, call the national toll-free telephone number, 1-877-KIDS NOW (543-7669). Even if you are not eligible, your child may be.
- Immunize children against serious diseases.
- Use car safety seats, and be a good example - wear a seat belt. Place children 12 years and younger in the back seats of vehicles in seat belts or in properly buckled safety seats, appropriate for ages and sizes. Never place an infant in a rear-facing seat in the front seat of an air-bag-equipped car. Children 40 to 80 pounds (about 4 to 8 years) and shorter than 4'9" tall should be strapped in booster seats.
- Make sure your child uses safety equipment. Children should always wear helmets and appropriate protective gear when bicycling, skating, or engaging in sports.
- Child-proof your home by placing medicines and poisons out of a child's reach (see ACEP's Home Safety Checklist). For a poison emergency, call 800-222-1222.

Preparing for a Medical Emergency

The next step is to prepare for an emergency. Your child's pediatrician or family physician can describe the care in your community and help you develop an emergency plan *before* an emergency occurs.

Make sure your children know how to phone for help. Practice with them. They should be able to call 911 or the local emergency number, and give their names, address, and a brief description of the problem.

Organize your family's medical information. Keep up-to-date medical history forms on each family member and keep copies in your home, car, and wallet. Take the form with you when you go to the emergency department. In addition, complete medical consent-to-treat forms for each child. Provide copies to all caregivers (e.g., babysitters, relatives, school

nurses, and teachers). This form will allow caregivers to authorize treatment in an emergency situation when you're away from your child.

Warning Signs of a Medical Emergency



Always get immediate medical attention if you think your child is having a medical emergency. Parents should know that children have unique medical problems and may display different symptoms from adults when they become sick or injured. Their treatments differ too. Symptoms that are serious for a child may not be as serious for an adult, and vice versa. In addition, children may not be able to communicate what's wrong, which means you have to interpret their behavior.

Medical emergencies can occur from sudden events, such as a serious fall, a motor vehicle crash, or a deep wound or cut. Serious injuries also can result from electric shock; foreign bodies stuck in the nose, ear, or eye; hypothermia; or animal or human bites. Head injuries can be serious, especially if followed by confusion, severe headache, unconsciousness, or vomiting.

A child's behavior or symptoms may also indicate a medical emergency. Consider getting immediate medical attention if your child exhibits:

- Strange or withdrawn behavior, or any significant change from normal behavior
- Abnormal or difficult breathing
- Decreasing responsiveness or alertness
- Excessive sleepiness
- Irritability
- Feeding difficulties
- Confusion or delirium
- Skin or lips that look blue or purple (gray for darker-skinned children).
- Unconsciousness
- Uncontrolled bleeding
- Increasing or severe, persistent pain
- Fever accompanied by change in behavior (especially with a severe, sudden headache accompanied by mental changes, neck/back stiffness, or rashes)
- Severe or persistent vomiting or diarrhea

These are some examples. Ask your child's physician about other warning signs. Factors, such as previous medical problems, may be important.

When an Emergency Occurs



When a child experiences a medical emergency, it's important to stay calm and to call for help.

- If you need immediate help, call 9-1-1 (or your local emergency services number).
- If needed and you know how, start rescue breathing or CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation).
- If you have learned first aid, apply the techniques to stop serious bleeding, manage shock, handle fractures, and

control a fever, until help arrives. In addition, if needed and you know how, perform basic choking rescue procedures for infants and children.

- If your child is having a seizure, place him or her on a carpeted floor with the child's head turned to the side, and stay with your child until help arrives.

In a medical emergency, parents should take their child to the nearest emergency department, unless directed to another nearby hospital by the child's physician or emergency services personnel. However, when time is of the essence (e.g., when a child is choking) go to the nearest emergency department and get help as quickly as possible. An ambulance may take your child to the nearest emergency department or to a nearby specialty center, if appropriate. If necessary, after stabilization, your child may be transferred to a hospital with advanced pediatric capabilities.

Going to the Emergency Department

Bring any medications your child is taking and his or her medical history form. Also bring any suspected poisons or other medications your child might have swallowed. Hospitals can be frightening places for children. To help make your child less anxious, bring along a favorite toy or book.

In addition:

- Explain what to expect. Be honest and comforting.
- Listen to your child. Give permission to ask questions, cry, and talk about feelings. Let your child know it's okay to be afraid and to say something hurts.
- Share your feelings with your child, but remain calm; children sense when adults are anxious.

For children with chronic medical conditions or disabilities, a medical history form is available –the ***Emergency Information Form for Children With Special Needs:***

(<http://www.emergencycareforyou.org/EmergencyManual/MedicalForms/Default.aspx?id=674>). The form should be completed by the child's pediatrician or specialist. Children with special health care needs should also wear identifying medical jewelry — a necklace or bracelet with information about medications, hospitalizations, operations, and immunizations.

Copies of all the forms are available on ACEP's Web site at www.EmergencyCareForYou.org.

In addition, ACEP recommends that you:

- Keep well-stocked first-aid kits in your home and car; include medical history forms for your family.
- Post emergency numbers near all your telephones.
- Learn to recognize childhood emergency warning signs by taking a first-aid class and learning CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Your local American Red Cross and the American Heart Association may conduct courses in your area.

Remember, emergency physicians have special expertise in childhood emergencies and in identifying life-threatening problems. Emergency medicine residency programs provide comprehensive training in caring for childhood emergencies. Residents are trained in pediatric airway management, resuscitation, and emergency trauma care.

Emergency physicians have led the way to improve the standards and quality of emergency care of children around the world. Many have devoted their careers to improving emergency care of children through research, training, development of clinical policies, and public education about injury and illness prevention. ACEP was among the first organizations to develop pediatric guidelines for emergency departments and ambulances.

Emergency physicians continue to play an active role in developing innovative systems that revolutionize children's emergency care.

Click here to download a “Consent for Medical/Surgical Care/Emergency Treatment Form.”
<http://www.acep.org/1,4001,0.html?ext=.pdf>

Tape the following numbers on or near all your telephones:

EMERGENCY TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Emergency Medical Services: 9-1-1 or:

Police Department: 9-1-1 or:

Fire Department: 9-1-1 or:

Emergency Department:

Poison Control Center:

Family Physician:

Pediatrician:

Dentist:

Your Home Phone:

Your Home Address:

For more information or materials visit www.ACEP.org or call 1-800-320-0610, ext. 3006.

Disclaimer: Readers are advised that the statements and opinions expressed in this brochure are provided as guidelines and should not be construed as ACEP policy. The information in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician or specialist. ACEP disclaims any responsibility for the consequences of any actions taken in reliance on those statements or opinions.

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