

What to do while you're waiting for the ambulance

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No one is prepared for a medical emergency, but when the unexpected happens, you can help make a bad situation better—especially if you're a bystander.

The first thing—and don't take offense here—is get out of the way.

"Our priority is to make sure no one is putting themselves in danger. We don't need to have another person who needs [emergency care](#)," said Brandon Wattai, manager of transport/post hospital operations, Life Lion Emergency Medical Services at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. "Often adrenalin and tensions are running high, and everyone wants to help as much as they can, but please step aside and let the emergency medical technicians and paramedics do their jobs unless they ask for your help."

The second thing—keep calm.

"It sounds cliché and it is hard to do, but remaining level-headed is extremely important in helping us to help the patient better and faster," Wattai said. "The more heightened emotions there are when we arrive, the more uncertainty we have about what's going on, and the harder it is to immediately start giving the right care."

Of course, the unpredictability of the emergency situation—whether on the side of the road after a [car accident](#) or at home when a medical crisis strikes—means it's hard to talk in absolutes.

In general, however, start by having good information on hand when you call 911, including the address and a concise description of what happened. If possible, write down the patient's name and date of birth for the EMS crew if the individual can't speak for themselves.

"Flag us down as soon as you see us coming," Wattai said. "If you're at a residence, have someone outside to help us find the right house, especially if it's 3 a.m."

Two situations that call for pre-emptive action

There are two medical situations in which the help of a family member or bystander can truly make a difference in the outcome.

"If it's a [cardiac arrest](#), we're a huge advocate of someone starting hands-only cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) while we're en route," Wattai said. "This can buy us a few extra minutes that could turn an unsalvageable situation into a saved life."

Push hard and fast on the center of the chest, a recommendation backed by the American Heart Association. The 911 call taker will talk you through the process, Wattai said.

Profuse bleeding is another emergency medical situation where quick action can be lifesaving.

"If someone is having a significant arterial bleed, it only takes a couple of minutes before they lose enough blood that their life is in danger," Wattai said. "Apply hard, direct and constant pressure to the wound." Don't worry about finding a clean blanket or clothing item to use—germs are the least of your worries in this scenario.

While you wait at home

After you've phoned for help, take a moment to survey the area where the paramedics will need access. Clear a pathway to the patient by moving furniture or clutter that will slow them down once they arrive.

Even if your dog is friendly or your cat never swats at strangers, it's a good idea to isolate them in another room just in case they react to the unpredictable situation.

"It's very helpful to write down a list of the patient's medications,

allergies and medical history that you can send with the paramedics," Wattai said. "Also include the name and contact information of a family member if one isn't on site."

Make a plan for who is going to follow the ambulance to the hospital and pack a few of the patient's personal items into a small bag for that person to tote along. Don't try to load the first responders down with extra cargo.

While you wait after an accident

It's best to stay in your car, but if you must get out, be very aware of your surroundings at all times, especially if traffic is continuing to move past you on the road. "Again, our single biggest consideration is your safety," Wattai said.

When you're the patient

Draw confidence in knowing expert help is coming.

"Understand we have quite a few pieces of equipment and medication on our ambulance to take care of a huge array of medical conditions, and we'll treat you on the way to the hospital," Wattai said. "Be aware that we are in communication with the facility where we're taking you, so they are ready for you."

Be open and honest about how you're feeling and get over any feelings of foolishness that a loved one called for help or any protests that you're 'not sick enough' for an ambulance ride.

If you've been in an accident, don't try to get up. You may have injuries that will make recovery harder if you move too much, Wattai said.

When it's over and you look back at the emergency, some things may be a blur, but knowing you did the best you can do will go a long way toward feeling peace about the situation, Wattai said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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