

What's 'Code Blue'? new study finds some hospital staff mistake emergency codes

January 19 2023, by Cara Murez



Hospital emergency codes are used to swiftly alert staff to something

requiring a quick response, but a recent study suggests many health care workers can't accurately identify them.

To learn more, researchers focused on five Georgia [health](#) care facilities. [The study](#) included 304 employees and codes for 14 emergencies. On average, participants could correctly identify emergency codes 44% of the time. The best-known codes were those for fire, infant abduction and cardiac arrest.

"The results of our study suggest a prompt response to such incidents is likely to be poor, as most employees were unaware of the meanings or actions of these notifications," co-author [Morgan Taylor](#) said in a University of Georgia news release. She is a doctoral student at the university's College of Public Health.

Many of the participants reported that codes were only introduced at their orientation, with little training on them.

"Codes are often confusing because we do not use or practice them regularly. It is unreasonable to assume that staff will retain the knowledge they receive during orientation, disaster simulations, or once-a-year in-service reminders," said lead researcher [Curt Harris](#), director of the Institute for Disaster Management at UGA.

"It is also unreasonable to assume that just because the meaning of the color [code](#) is on the back of their badges, an appropriate and prompt response will ensue," he said in the release.

Not all hospitals use color codes, but those that do have separate codes for each type of emergency.

"Code Blue" is often used when a patient has stopped breathing or their heart has stopped beating unexpectedly and they need resuscitation. But

there is no universal standard for codes, according to the study.

Transitioning from color codes to [plain language](#) may reduce [employee](#) confusion and training time, though [employees](#) in this study were concerned doing so might cause extreme panic and fear for visitors and patients.

Those concerns are contradictory to current research, Taylor said.

"We know plain language communications reduce bystander panic and confusion," she said. "Our study highlights the continued need for effective training and education that helps translate this research into practice."

The findings were recently published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [tips](#) for patients to stay safe in a hospital setting.

Curt Harris et al, Breaking the Code: Considerations for Effectively Disseminating Mass Notifications in Healthcare Settings, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph191811802](#)

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