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→ **Make the Call**  
If symptoms could get worse on the way to the hospital, it's best to call an ambulance.

BE PREPARED

## When to Call 911

Dialing those three numbers is the fastest way to get life-saving help. But how do you know it's a true emergency?

IN A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, EVERY SECOND COUNTS. THE FASTER YOU GET EXPERT care, the more likely you are to survive a heart attack, stroke, or other health crisis. But first, you must detect the danger signs and seek help.

Rule No. 1? Trust your instincts, says Hamad Husainy, DO, FACEP, medical director of the emergency department at North Alabama Medical Center in Florence, Alabama. "If you think it's bad enough, you should probably call," he says.

In an emergency, symptoms are often severe and sudden or rapidly getting worse. For example, sudden weakness or numbness on one side of the body may signal a stroke, and crushing pressure in the chest is a classic sign of a heart attack. Heavy bleeding from a deep cut that won't stop when you apply pressure also warrants a call to 911.

Take into account age and other health conditions, as minor symptoms can become major problems for the very young or very old. Infections spread quickly in a newborn, so a fever of 100.4 degrees or greater in a baby up to 2 months old should be treated as an emergency. In an older adult, pain in the neck, jaw, or back or sudden shortness of breath might point to a heart attack. However, "some of the most significant heart attacks I've seen have had subtle pains and slight changes in pain or indigestion," Husainy says.

Your call to 911 will bring emergency medical personnel to assess the situation and provide immediate care, which is especially critical if distance or traffic would delay your trip to a hospital. If the situation isn't as dire as you thought, the EMT or paramedic may advise you to follow up with your physician rather than transporting you to the hospital.

Husainy recalls the recent case of a 74-year-old man who had chest discomfort and just didn't feel well when he awoke one morning. His wife wanted to call 911, but he told her not to. An hour later, she found him slumped over the wheel of his car. By the time emergency personnel arrived, it was too late. When in doubt, make that call—you could be glad you did so.

### Red Flags

THESE SYMPTOMS MAY BE TELLTALE SIGNS OF AN EMERGENCY AND WARRANT A CALL TO 911, SAYS MEDICAL DIRECTOR **HAMAD HUSAINY, DO**

#### VOMITING

Vomiting blood requires emergency attention. So does vomiting that is severe, lasts 24 hours or more, or accompanies chest pain, severe stomach or rectal pain, or a recent head injury.

#### PAIN

Beware of sudden, intense pain, especially along with dizziness or shortness of breath. Severe abdominal pain could be appendicitis or a perforated ulcer. A headache that feels different from previous headaches could signal a stroke.

#### LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Fainting occurs when the blood supply to the brain suddenly drops. In a person with diabetes, very low blood sugar can cause loss of consciousness. Fainting also could be a sign of a heart attack, abnormal heart rhythm, or seizure.