



DYNAMIC AGING

Emergency Preparedness

Our last column, acknowledging February's American Heart Month, focused on providing heart strengthening local physical activity options that are free, or offered for a very low cost. We also provided a summary of the signs and symptoms of a heart attack and the importance of calling 911. In today's column, we continue this discussion.

Nationally, approximately one third of acute heart attack victims do not receive the immediate care they need to save heart muscle and reduce the death rate. Damage to the heart can occur within 15 minutes of occlusion (clot blockage of a critical artery to the heart) and progress rapidly if untreated. The more quickly the appropriate care can be provided the more likely the patient is to survive, and the more likely damage to heart muscle is reduced. Thus, efficient coordination of immediate care is critical to improving patient outcomes.

Jay Bradshaw, Director of Maine Emergency Medical Services, Department of Public Safety, and member of the *In a Heartbeat* Executive Committee, provides a good overview of the EMS process:

"The first and, perhaps most important, step in the Emergency Management System (EMS) is you, the person who sees or experiences an emergency and calls 911. Within the health care system, there are many steps involved in providing care, and each of these steps takes time. On a regular basis, hospitals and EMS services review these steps and make adjustments to reduce unnecessary delays. Ambulance services do the same by modifying their staffing structure, and even adjust ambulance locations. These changes can be life saving, but only if the 911 call is placed in a timely manner.

It is well known, and frequently observed, that many people who are exhibiting the signs and symptoms of a heart attack, stroke or other emergency, hesitate to call 911. Part of the hesitation is likely due to our inherent independence and our reluctance to involve others with our problems, or to enter into the unknown realm of EMS."

So, what are the signs of a heart attack? We listed them in the last column and they certainly bear repeating:

- **Chest pain or discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- **Pain or discomfort in the upper body (one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach)**
- **Shortness of breath**
- **Breaking out in a cold sweat**
- **Nausea**
- **Lightheadedness**

- **Women are somewhat more likely than men to experience shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting, and back or jaw pain.**

What happens when a 911 call is placed in Maine? Bradshaw continues by telling us the “EMS system is activated, and care begins immediately, literally, with the person who answers the 911 call. Effective Jan. 1, 2007, all people who answer 911 calls are required to be certified emergency medical dispatchers. EMDs are trained to ask specific questions that alert the responding EMS crews about the nature of the emergency, identify what additional resources may be needed, and provide instructions on how to begin treatment for specific emergencies, such as heart attacks.” Bradshaw also tells us that if you drive yourself or a loved one to the hospital instead of calling 911, which triggers the EMS system, the critical communication and coordination of care needed to save lives and physical functionality, are delayed and sometimes lost forever. Jay Bradshaw can be reached at jay.bradshaw@maine.gov .

To learn more about Emergency Preparedness, join the Lake Region Elder Network at the Naples Municipal Conference Room, on March 1, at 9 10:30 am. This will be facilitated by Faye Daley, Bridgton Health Officer, and Bill Morrisseau, Emergency Preparedness Manager in Bridgton. A light breakfast will be served. For more information, call 693-4545.

In a Heartbeat is a statewide coalition of medical providers, Emergency Medical Services, Maine Center for Disease Control, community outreach, and health advocacy organizations. We work to ensure that Mainers who've had recent heart attacks receive timely, quality care. To arrange a presentation on *In a Heartbeat* for your local club or organization, please contact me at 693-4545.