

When Seconds Count—Workplace First Aid

Workplace accidents requiring emergency first aid don't happen every day, but when they do, quick and capable care is essential. Here are some tips for making sure your first-aid plan is up to par.

Picture this:

- A worker is hurt in an accident and blood is gushing from the wound.
- One of your employees chokes on a piece of food and can't breathe.
- Someone goes into cardiac arrest right at his workstation.

Would your employees be ready to act with speed and competence in a workplace medical emergency?

They would if they were trained in first aid. The *OSHA Required Training for Supervisors* monthly newsletter says that every work area and every work shift should have at least a few employees (the more, the better) who have received first-aid training and who can respond to workplace medical emergencies, such as:

- Bleeding
- Broken bones
- Heart attack
- Eye injuries
- Stopped breathing
- Heatstroke
- No pulse
- Choking
- Burns
- Shock
- Chemical poisoning

In fact, in some cases, OSHA requires it. The OSHA First Aid standard (29 CFR 1910.151) says there must be trained first-aid providers at workplaces where there is no "infirmary, clinic, or hospital in near proximity to the workplace which is used for the treatment of all injured employees." The standard also requires that appropriate first-aid supplies be "readily available."

Call for Help

The first priority in any serious workplace medical emergency is to call for help. If an accident results in injuries, someone should immediately call for an ambulance and stay on the line with the dispatcher. Another employee should notify a supervisor. Someone should head for the main entrance to await the EMTs and lead them to the victim or victims. Other employees can give first aid. If only one employee is on the scene of an accident, the first priority is always to call for emergency medical assistance and then apply first aid.

Assess the Scene

Once help is on the way, first-aid responders must take a moment to assess the scene to make sure it's safe and to be certain they know what type of first aid is required. OSHA says that, before treating victims, first-aid responders should:

- Evaluate the scene for safety, number of injured, and nature of the event.
- Assess the toxic potential of the environment and any need for respiratory protection.
- Prioritize care when there are several injured.
- Assess each victim for responsiveness, airway blockage, breathing, and circulation, and check for medical alert tags.
- Perform a logical head-to-toe check for injuries.
- Reposition ill or injured workers if necessary to prevent further injury.

Safety News

Treat the Victim(s)

When the situation has been evaluated, responders are ready to treat the victim or victims. Taking swift action for life-threatening emergencies might require first-aid responders to:

- Perform rescue breathing.
- Treat airway obstructions.
- Perform CPR.
- Use an automated external defibrillator (AED).
- Control bleeding with direct pressure.
- Deal with poisoning.
- Recognize signs of shock, heart attacks, strokes, or other sudden potentially deadly illness.
- Continuously monitor victims for changes in condition.

First-Aid Training: What to Emphasize

To prepare first-aid responders to act quickly, confidently, and effectively, you need to provide proper training. OSHA says that workplace first-aid training should emphasize a number of key points, including:

- The need for quick action
- Treatment of common types of workplace injuries and illnesses
- Development of hands-on skills through practice drills
- Reference materials for use during and after training
- Strategies for overcoming stress, fear, and panic, which can interfere with effective emergency action
- The importance of universal precautions and required PPE (such as gloves and eye protection) to prevent exposure to bloodborne pathogens
- Knowledge of hazardous chemicals in the workplace and first aid for inhalation, ingestion, and skin or eye contact

And because there might be long intervals between when first-aid responders learn and use first-aid skills, retraining at regular intervals is essential. OSHA says that retraining for life-threatening emergencies should occur at least annually, while retraining for non-life-threatening response should occur "periodically."