

Are You Prepared for a Medical Emergency in Your Office?

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Most primary care physicians report at least one office medical emergency per year. Asthma, anaphylaxis, shock, seizures and cardiac arrest are among the most common adult and pediatric emergencies in the office setting. When asked, patients state that they expect their physicians and staff to be able to handle an office medical emergency. Are you prepared to handle a medical emergency?

Prevention

Prevention of a medical emergency begins as soon as the patient enters your office and fills out the medical questionnaire. An accurate medical history is important for the physician to identify any predisposing factors that could give rise to an unforeseen event. It is important to update your written medical questionnaire annually or when there has been a significant break in care.

Preparation for a Medical Emergency

There are many times when it is too late or not possible to prevent a medical emergency. Here are some basic steps which should be taken to improve patient safety.

Develop a Medical Emergency Plan

The Medical Emergency Plan (Plan) should be tailored to your specific practice and should consider patient age range, type of specific medical conditions treated in your office and the skills possessed by each office staff member.

At a minimum, the Plan should include:

- Important telephone numbers;
- Emergency equipment, supplies and medications;
- Staff competency, training and responsibilities; and
- Emergency drills.

The Plan should outline the steps to follow in the event of an emergency and it should detail which staff is assigned to each specific task.

In drafting the Plan, it is important to ask yourself the following questions:

- What equipment, drugs and supplies do you have available?
- What do you need to add?
- Where are the supplies kept?
- Are they routinely checked and updated?

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Anticipate Possible Medical Emergencies

To prepare for a medical emergency, ask yourself: What types of procedures are performed in my office?

If you perform invasive procedures, surgical procedures, cardiac testing, or administer anesthesia, you may have a duty to be prepared to handle medical emergencies that might arise as a result of these medical interventions. For example, a surgeon's office should be prepared to treat emergencies which include fainting, weakness and bleeding; while a cardiology office may need to treat hypotension or cardiac arrest. Additionally, an allergist's office may need to treat anaphylactic shock; while a primary care office may identify and treat much broader range of emergencies. The key is to identify anticipated medical emergencies specifically related to your patient mix and specialty.

Identify Emergency Telephone Numbers

Determine what emergency numbers are necessary and have them readily available. The following numbers are important: 911, local ambulance service, and the patient's emergency contact.

Emergency Equipment, Supplies and Drugs

Evaluate your practice and decide how much medical intervention you are comfortable with and what is needed to manage a medical emergency in your office. The physician is responsible for deciding what level of care to provide and what types of drugs and equipment to stock.

As a reminder, you can be held liable for both what you do not have in place as well as what is in place that does not work. Some offices choose to have available oral airways, oxygen tank with tubing and mask, pocket mask, and Ambu bag with assorted masks. If you have this equipment

available, be sure to routinely check that your O₂ tank is full and the other necessary equipment is available and not expired.

Train Your Staff

What is the appropriate level of response for your office staff? The entire staff is essential to the successful implementation of an effective medical emergency plan. It is very important that all staff know and understand the office medical emergency plan. Staff meeting time should be spent in discussing and training staff for a medical emergency.

It is important to review with staff the warning signs of an impending emergency and what to do. Review the office medical emergency plan, emergency medications, and equipment. Reinforce the need for updating the patient's medical history by updating the emergency contact information.

Some offices are committed to having their staff learn basic CPR. This might be more important in practices that treat high risk patients i.e. a cardiology practice. Try to schedule mock drills routinely. A mock emergency will increase and maintain the staffs' level of preparedness, should a real emergency occur. The drill should allow the staff to practice all steps involved in the office medical Emergency Plan, as well as, practice individual life-saving skills. At a minimum, the mock drill will help to decrease staff anxiety and increase confidence in handling a medical emergency.

In summary, offices should create a written medical emergency plan that outlines the steps to be followed in the event of an office medical emergency.

The choice of emergency medications and equipment should be tailored to the anticipated emergencies for your patient population, the skills of the practitioners and the distance to the emergency room or anticipated response of the EMS team.