

“9-1-1: what is the nature

By Colleen Marble

It was just after midnight, and my 9-month-old son’s harsh coughing sounded terrible. His abdomen contracted with every breath, something I knew was sign of respiratory distress.

Having experienced breathing problems with my older son, I was no stranger to middle-of-the-night wheezing and hacking. But when a steamy shower and a nebulizer treatment did nothing to lessen my baby’s distress, my husband suggested calling 9-1-1.

Calling 9-1-1: How and when to call for help



of your emergency?”

Surprisingly, I hesitated. “What if it’s nothing?” I wondered. I didn’t want to be one of “those moms” who freak out over every snuffle, and I thought 9-1-1 would be overkill. But after several more minutes passed with no improvement, we dialed.

As it turns out, my son had a severe case of croup. It took three hours of treatment in the ER to return his breathing to normal and another few hours of observation to be sure he was okay. But by 8 a.m., we were all back home, safe and sound.

I have since wondered why I paused before dialing 9-1-1. I know it’s always better to be safe than sorry. But fear and uncertainty kept me from acting quickly, and the consequences could have been dire.

When is it really an emergency?

If you think your child is ill, you can start by calling his pediatrician. “When possible, it’s easier and more efficient to see the doctor in her office, because hospitals often require lengthy paperwork and extended waits before your child receives attention,” says Steven P. Shelov, MD and editor-in-chief of the American Academy of Pediatrics book *Your Baby’s First Year*.

However, don’t hesitate to call 9-1-1 or your local emergency number for help if you are concerned that your child’s life may be in danger or that he is seriously ill or injured. “Serious medical problems usually are better handled at the hospital, where staff and medical equipment are always available,” Shelov explains.

“A true emergency is when you believe a severe injury or illness is threatening your child’s life or may cause permanent harm,” he continues. “In these cases, a child needs emergency medical treatment right away.”

What are the signs of an emergency?

Emergencies can result from illness or injury. Your child may show any of the following signs:

- Acting strangely or becoming more withdrawn and less alert
- Unconsciousness or no response when you talk to your child
- Rhythmic jerking and/or loss of consciousness (a seizure)
- Increasing effort or trouble with breathing
- Skin or lips that look blue, purple or gray
- Neck stiffness or a rash with fever
- Increasing or severe persistent pain
- A cut that is large, deep, or involves the head, chest, or abdomen
- Bleeding that does not stop after applying pressure for five minutes
- A burn that is large and/or involves the hands, feet, groin, chest, or face
- Any loss of consciousness, confusion, headache, or vomiting after a head injury.

Many emergencies involve sudden injuries, which can be caused by:

- Bicycle or car crashes
- Falls
- Sports injuries
- Burns or smoke inhalation
- Choking
- Near drowning
- Firearms or other weapons
- Electric shocks
- Poisoning

Call your poison control center at 1-800-222-1222 at once if your child has swallowed a suspected poison or another person’s medication, even if your child has no signs or symptoms.

What do I do in an emergency?

If your child needs emergency medical treatment:

- Stay calm.
- Start rescue breathing or CPR if your child is not breathing.
- Call 9-1-1 if you need immediate help. If you do not have 9-1-1 service in your area, call your local emergency ambulance service or county emergency medical service. Most cell phones can reach 9-1-1, but you will have to tell the operator where you are.
- Apply continuous pressure to the site of bleeding with a clean cloth.
- Place your child on the floor with her head and body turned to the side if she is having a seizure. Do not put anything in her mouth.
- Do not move your injured child unless she is in immediate danger (for example, from a fire).
- Stay with your child until help arrives.

Bring any medication your child is taking with you to the hospital, along with any suspected poisons or other medications your child might have taken. After you arrive, tell the emergency staff the name of your child’s pediatrician.

If your child has special care needs, prepare an Emergency Information Form (EIF) or similar form that describes those needs for emergency care providers. This form is available at www.aap.org. Attach this information to your list of emergency phone numbers and give it to the first emergency care person to see your child. ●