

If we hike long enough we will eventually be faced with dealing with a medical emergency. Our response to this situation will be determined by our preparedness for it. The best thing that we can carry with us is knowledge and we can gain this knowledge from courses such as wilderness first aid, reading books and articles on the subject and experience.

First aid courses are readily available and more organizations are putting on wilderness courses – take one! The first aid book that I use is the Saint John Ambulance Official Wilderness First-Aid Guide and I will use it extensively in this article. Experience in these matters is a little harder to come by, but the wilderness first aid courses usually have an outdoors, hands-on segment. As day hikers we have to look at what are the most common emergencies that we will be required to deal with. I'll list some but you can probably think of more.



Common Emergencies for Day Hikers

- broken bones
- strains/sprains
- cuts/abrasions
- dehydration
- heart attack/stroke
- insect bites
- hypothermia
- eye injuries
- heat exhaustion/sun stroke

Once we have a medical emergency we must consider the following.

Breathing Problems

Generally the best position for the injured person is the “recovery position” (on his side) with the airway clear. If there is trouble breathing in this position consider “semi sitting”.

Cold/Exposure

The injured person is vulnerable to hypothermia and must be protected from the elements. Use a “sit upon” (closed cell foam pads) under the person, add clothing and some shelter over the person [i.e. a “space blanket” or fly sheet].

Shock

Interruption of our normal breathing and circulation can lead to shock in an injured person. Stop any bleeding and provide a comfortable, reassuring environment with the legs raised.

Dehydration

Provide sufficient water to the injured person. This condition is best avoided by keeping yourself well hydrated during all outdoor activities.

Scene Management

Management of the scene is very important. The person in charge must look at what resources he has available and the location. It is usually better if the person in charge does just that, directs others.

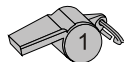
- Who in the group has medical training?
- What first aid supplies are available?
- What shelter is available?
- Is a cell phone available?
- Where exactly are we?
- Who are strong hikers to go for aid?
- What needs to be done for the safety of the rest of the group?

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What can we learn from the above list?

- Know your group.
- Carry a cell phone.
- Carry a good map and know where you are.
- Carry first aid supplies.

If there are sufficient hikers do not leave the injured person alone and when sending for aid send three or four, these hikers should carry a cell phone, map and whistle. All hikers are to be encouraged to carry a whistle and know the code.



1 blast – Stop



2 blasts – Come to me



3 blasts – Come to me quickly

I am often asked, “What should a first aid kit contain?” The easiest solution is to carry a made up, packaged kit such as the Saint John Ambulance Fanny Pack, which can treat small and medium wounds and costs about \$25.00. Then add to it items such as latex gloves, space blanket, Swiss Army knife with scissors and tweezers and tensor bandages (for knees and wrists). It is your responsibility to look at your own medical history and problems that you may develop and carry those special supplies you need. Items that are consumed frequently such as Band-Aids, moleskin and aspirin or Tylenol are best kept in a separate small kit so they can be accessed with disturbing your main kit. Finally, don’t forget to check your kit periodically and replace any items that have been consumed or have deteriorated.

Hike safely but hike!

Greg

About Greg

Greg is an experienced and certified hike leader and instructor. He has been a long time member of the Bruce Trail Association (www.bruce-trail.org), the Grand Valley Trails Association (www.gvta.on.ca) and other hiking organizations. Greg has an extensive background in aviation and air traffic control. Greg has taught introduction to hiking courses and map and compass courses for several years. Currently his website, Greg Vincent’s Hiking Site, resides at <http://home.golden.net/%7Egvincent/>

Other The Right Stuff articles are:

- “On the Up and Up” or Icy Walking
- Footwear - Boots & Socks (how to care for your feet & how to choose boots & socks)
- Clothing (how to keep warm & dry)
- Packs (what kind to carry & what to put in them)
- Bugs (how to avoid them & prevent their bothering you)
- Trail Safety (how to ensure you hike without incident)
- Trekking Poles (modern ones - what are they & why use them)
- Winter Walking (all the peculiarities of hiking in cold climes)
- Warm Weather Walking (the scoop on hiking in warm weather)
- Snowshoeing (If you can walk, you can snowshoe – no ifs, ands or buts.)
- Global Positioning System or GPS (What is it and how it works.)