

The Good Samaritan's guide to safely helping during an emergency

Emergencies require quick action, but many people hesitate to step in because they're worried about doing the wrong thing or even facing legal consequences. Fortunately, by understanding a few basic principles, you can make a meaningful difference while waiting for professional first responders to arrive.

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Imagine witnessing a car crash, seeing someone collapse at the gym, or finding a neighbor who has fallen. Most people instinctively want to help, but many hesitate. They worry about making the situation worse, being blamed if something goes wrong, or even being sued for trying to assist.

Those concerns are understandable, but they shouldn't prevent someone from taking lifesaving action. In the United States, [Good Samaritan laws](#) offer legal protections to those who act in good faith and provide reasonable assistance during a medical emergency. The goal is to remove barriers that might stop ordinary people from stepping in when someone needs help most. These laws vary by state and there is no current federal law.

The reality is that emergency responders can't arrive instantly. The actions taken by a nearby bystander in the first few minutes may have a significant impact on the outcome. Knowing what to do (and what not to do) can help you respond with confidence until professional help arrives. **The truth is simple: doing something appropriate is often far better than doing nothing at all.**

What are Good Samaritan laws?

[Good Samaritan laws](#) are legal protections that encourage bystanders to assist someone experiencing a medical emergency. States that have these laws generally provide protection when:

- You act voluntarily and in good faith.
- You provide reasonable assistance based on the situation.
- You stay within the limits of your knowledge and training.
- You are not acting recklessly or with gross negligence.

These protections exist because emergency situations are unpredictable, and the law recognizes that well-intentioned people shouldn't be punished for trying to help.

Important!

Good Samaritan laws vary by state. If you'd like to understand the specific protections where you live, consult your state's statutes or legal resources.

Related article: [Why timely care is important](#)

What to do if you witness an emergency

When an emergency happens, your actions in the first few minutes can make a significant difference. Follow these basic steps to help safely and effectively.

Make sure the scene is safe

[The Red Cross suggests first checking the scene for safety](#). Before rushing in, take a moment to assess the situation and ask yourself:

- Is there traffic?
- Is there fire, smoke, or electrical danger?
- Are there hazardous materials or violent individuals nearby?

You can't help someone else if you become another victim. If the scene isn't safe, keep your distance and call 911 immediately.

Call 911 right away

Never assume someone else has already called. If others are nearby, assign specific tasks instead of making a general request. The second step in the [Check, Call, Care approach by the Red Cross](#) is to make the call to 911.

Instead of saying: "Someone call 911." Say: "You in the blue shirt — please call 911." Specific instructions dramatically improve the chances that the task gets done.

Related article: [What EMS teams wish every caller knew](#)

Ask permission when possible

If the person is awake and responsive, introduce yourself and ask: "I'm here to help. Can I help you?" If they agree, you have their consent to assist.

[If they're unconscious or unable to respond](#), the law generally assumes they would want lifesaving assistance under what's known as "[implied consent](#)."

Stay within your training

One of the most important rules for any Good Samaritan is to do only what you know how to do. The Red Cross suggests that bystanders should only [care for the person according to their condition and your level of training](#). Examples include:

- Applying direct pressure to bleeding
- Helping someone remain still after a fall
- Providing reassurance until emergency services arrive
- Using an [Automated External Defibrillator \(AED\)](#) if available
- Performing [cardiopulmonary resuscitation \(CPR\)](#) if you're trained or following instructions from a 911 dispatcher if you're not

Do not attempt medical procedures you've never learned, practiced, or if the dispatcher hasn't guided you.

Don't move someone unless it's necessary

Moving an injured person may worsen spinal or neck injuries. Only move someone if:

- They are in immediate danger (fire, flood, traffic, collapsing structure)
- You must reposition them to perform CPR
- Emergency dispatch instructs you to do so

Follow the 911 dispatcher's instructions

Be prepared to follow any instructions the dispatcher may provide. Emergency dispatchers are trained to coach callers through many life-threatening situations. They can guide you through:

- Hands-only CPR
- Using an AED
- Helping someone who is choking
- Managing severe bleeding
- Positioning an unconscious person

Related article: [What to say when you call 911](#)

Coordinating others can also help save lives

You don't always have to provide hands-on care to make a tremendous difference.

If several people are present, assign clear roles:

- One person calls 911.
- Another retrieves the nearest first aid supplies or AED.
- Someone directs traffic away from the scene.
- Another comforts family members or gathers medications if requested.
- Someone waits outside to guide emergency responders to the exact location.

Good leadership during an emergency can help make professional responders even more effective once they arrive.

Concerns that might hold you back

"I'll get sued if I try to help."

Reality: Good Samaritan laws generally exist to protect people who provide reasonable emergency assistance in good faith.

"I could make things worse."

Reality: While no one should perform procedures beyond their training, calling 911, following dispatcher instructions, providing reassurance, using an AED, or performing CPR when appropriate can significantly improve survival.

"Someone else will handle it."

Reality: This "bystander effect" is common. Taking initiative and giving specific instructions to others can help ensure someone receives the care they need without delay.

Don't let cost delay a call for help

It's not uncommon for someone experiencing a medical emergency to resist calling an ambulance because they're worried about the cost. While that concern is understandable, it should never prevent them from getting lifesaving care.

If you're with someone who needs emergency medical attention, don't let financial concerns delay action. Call 911 immediately, even if they hesitate. In a life-threatening emergency, minutes matter, and prompt medical care can make all the difference.

Whether you're helping a loved one, a neighbor, or a stranger, the right decision is always to activate emergency medical services when they're needed.

Related article: [What to expect when you call 911](#)

Every bystander has the potential to save a life

You don't have to be a doctor or paramedic to make a meaningful difference if you remember these simple principles:

- Keep yourself safe.
- Call 911 immediately.
- Ask permission if the person is conscious.
- Stay within your level of training.
- Follow dispatcher instructions.
- Coordinate others when possible.
- Don't let fear or concerns about cost delay lifesaving action.

Good Samaritan laws were created because communities are stronger when people help one another. With a little knowledge and the confidence to act, you could become the person who makes all the difference when someone else's worst day becomes a story of survival.