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### Have a heart: Wear red, it's February

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February is American Heart Month because cardiovascular diseases - including stroke - remain the No. 1 cause of death in America.

To raise awareness of the risks of heart disease, many have taken to wearing red during the month as a symbol of support.

But, what should we do if faced with a friend or family member who is overcome and may be displaying symptoms of a heart attack or stroke?

The most important action to take is to dial 9-1-1 immediately because stroke and heart attack are life-and-death emergencies - every second counts.

Know the warning signs of a heart attack. Some are sudden and intense - but most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often people affected aren't sure what's wrong, and wait too long before getting help. Watch for:

- Chest discomfort, pressure, a sensation of fullness, or pain that may come and go;
- Discomfort in the upper body, such as pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach;
- Shortness of breath, with or without chest discomfort;
- Breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea, or lightheadedness.

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are more likely to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

The warning signs of a stroke are different, but it's equally as important to seek help immediately. They include:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body;
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding;
- Sudden trouble with vision in one or both eyes;
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination;
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause.

Check the time to know when the first symptoms appeared. A clot-busting drug called tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) can reduce the chances of long-term disability if given within three hours of the start of symptoms.

Again, the immediate response must be to dial 9-1-1. Emergency medical technicians will confirm that in the case of a stroke, "seconds lost are brain lost."

As if that did not cover all situations in which life-saving assistance may be called for, there is also cardiac arrest, which strikes without warning. Here are the signs:

- Sudden loss of responsiveness; no response to tapping on shoulders;
- No normal breathing; check whether the victim does not take a normal breath when the head is tilted up for at least five seconds.

The response? Call 9-1-1 and get an automated external defibrillator (AED) if one is available, and begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) immediately. Minutes matter.

But how many of us know how to administer CPR? How many of us are familiar with AEDs and how to use them?

Maybe February is a good time to learn. Maybe February is a good time to make a commitment to learn basic life-saving techniques.

Madison is fortunate to be among the 10 communities served by the Colonial Crossroads Chapter of the American Red Cross, with chapter houses in Madison and Summit.

In a cost-cutting move, the Red Cross chapter is looking to sell its Madison facility at 1 Madison Ave., but will be partnering with local organizations, like first aid squads, to offer services.

More to the point, the larger Summit chapter house at 695 Springfield Ave. will continue to regularly schedule and play host to health and safety classes, including first aid, CPR and the use of an AED.

For information about courses that can help to save a life, call the Colonial Crossroads Chapter of the American Red Cross in Madison at (973) 377-0455, or in Summit at (908) 273-2076, or visit [www.ccnjredcross.org](http://www.ccnjredcross.org).

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