Physicians Urge: Seek Care for Medical Emergencies

Staying home and avoiding the risk of exposure is the best way to protect yourself from [novel coronavirus (COVID-19)](). However, as people all around the world were urged to stay home and stay safe, visits to emergency departments everywhere sharply declined.

Now a disturbing trend has emerged that has Emergency Department physicians, first responders and coroners concerned. In addition to the rising death toll associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of Americans seem to be dying in their homes.

SOT
Dr. Leon Yeh, VP of Emergency Services, OSF HealthCare
"In the period since the stay at home order went in place, Peoria Area EMS has seen a lot more calls of patients who have died at home, unfortunately, compared to the same period last year."

Peoria County Coroner Jamie Harwood says his data shows the same trend.

SOT
Jamie Harwood, Peoria County Coroner
"When I look at our data, I try to compare our quarterly data by year, so for example I compare 2019 first quarter to 2020 first quarter to see, do we have a rise in our deaths or are we running steady. Right now we are running ahead, significantly ahead. Now, what types of deaths are those? What I have seen is some of our deaths at home have gone up comparatively."

Many ED physicians worry that people at home are ignoring the warning signs of serious and potentially fatal medical emergencies like a heart attack or stroke. These emergencies still pose a risk during a pandemic, as do complications from chronic health conditions like heart disease and diabetes.

It's unclear exactly how many patients may be suffering silently at home in lieu of heading to hospital emergency departments, but fear of catching COVID-19 is proving costly to those who might otherwise have sought care quickly.

Dr. Yeh says some patients are waiting days before coming to the ED for treatment.

SOT
Dr. Leon Yeh, VP of Emergency Services, OSF HealthCare
"Certainly don't wait if you have chest pain, shortness of breath, abdominal pain. Those are really serious conditions that need to be checked out immediately. We have seen patients who have come in with later presentations of illness, such as heart attacks, strokes, and even ruptured appendicitis. These things are time dependent and you really do need to go to the emergency department when you have those symptoms."

Dr. Yeh believes there is community concern about coming to hospitals or EDs for fear of catching COVID-19. In fact, in an online Gallup poll taken between March 28 and April 2, 83-percent of Americans surveyed said they felt [moderately or very concerned]() about catching COVID-19 at a doctor's office or hospital.

All OSF emergency departments have made sure they can safely treat all patients by screening and isolating any patients believed to be at risk of COVID-19.

By keeping patients separated and using personal protective equipment such as masks, emergency rooms are still a safe and necessary destination for those in need of immediate medical care.

SOT
Dr. Leon Yeh, VP of Emergency Services, OSF HealthCare
"We have invested a lot of time in planning to make sure that all of our patients and also our staff are well protected during this period. That involves protocols and procedures and policies around cleaning, around screening patients who are coming into our offices or into the ED, and making sure they are isolated from the rest of the population."

Harwood says in his experience these protocols are apparent, and urges people to seek the care they need, before his office gets called in.

SOT
Jamie Harwood, Peoria County Coroner
"Everyone is using precautions – standard precautions as necessary. I have witnessed people cleaning and disinfecting as they're supposed to be. It's perfectly safe. When they're having symptoms of a complaint that's outside of their normal body that they need to seek treatment. Call 911 and go to the ER."

Knowing when to seek help is the first step toward recovering from a medical emergency. Classic heart attack symptoms include chest pain, shortness of breath, sweating and nausea. Heart attack pain will typically start in your chest and radiate into your left arm or jaw.

To recognize symptoms of a stroke, remember the acronym BE FAST.

- **Balance** – Watch for a sudden loss of balance.
- **Eyes** – Is there a sudden loss of vision in one or both eyes? Or double vision?
- **Face** – Ask the person to smile or show their teeth. Does one side of the face droop?
- **Arm** – Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?
- **Speech** – Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence. Do they slur their words? Do they repeat the sentence incorrectly?
- **Time to call 911** – If a person shows any of these symptoms, get to the hospital as quickly as possible.

If you're experiencing a medical emergency such as heart attack or stroke, never drive yourself to the emergency room. The fastest and safest way to get the care you need is by calling 911.