Recognizing and Caring for Respiratory Distress

Respiratory distress—a condition in which breathing becomes difficult—is the most common type of breathing emergency. Respiratory distress can be caused by a variety of illnesses and injuries, including an obstructed airway, asthma, anaphylactic shock, and the childhood condition croup.

A victim of respiratory distress may show various signs and symptoms, including:

**Abnormal breathing**
- Breathing is slow or rapid
- Breaths are unusually deep or shallow
- Victim is gasping for breath
- Victim is wheezing, gurgling or making high pitched noises

**Skin appearance**
- Victim's skin is unusually moist or cool
- Victim's skin has a flushed, pale, ashen or bluish appearance

**How the victim feels**
- Victim feels short of breath
- Victim feels dizzy or lightheaded
- Victim feels pain in the chest or tingling in hands, feet or lips
- Victim feels apprehensive or fearful

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of respiratory distress and giving care are often keys to preventing other emergencies. Respiratory distress may signal the beginning of a life-threatening condition, such as a more serious breathing emergency or even a heart attack. Respiratory distress can lead to respiratory arrest; if not immediately cared for, respiratory arrest will result in death.

You do not need to know the specific cause of a victim's respiratory distress to provide care effectively. Remember to always check the scene to ensure your safety before you approach the victim. If the victim is breathing, you know his or her heart is beating. Help him or her rest in a comfortable position. Usually sitting is more comfortable because breathing is easier in this position. Provide fresh air by opening a door or window if you are indoors or by moving the victim to fresh air. Make sure someone has called the local emergency number for help.

A person experiencing breathing difficulty may have trouble talking. Therefore, talk to any bystanders who may know about the victim's condition. The victim can confirm answers or answer yes-or-no questions by nodding. If possible, try to reduce any anxiety that may contribute to the victim's breathing difficulty. Continue to look and listen for any changes in the victim's breathing and level of unconsciousness. Calm and reassure the victim and help maintain normal body temperature by preventing chilling on a cool day or by providing shade on a hot day. If it is available, assist the victim in taking his or her prescribed medication for the condition, such as oxygen, an inhalant (bronchial dilator) or medication in an anaphylaxis kit. Continue to monitor the victim until emergency help arrives.