

You Respect Our Mission, Please Respect Our Emblem

The Significance of the Red Cross Emblem



What does the Red Cross emblem really mean?

Imagine a battlefield where no one can differentiate between medical personnel and combatants, where the wounded cannot get help and where field hospitals and medical vehicles come under fire. That is the world that existed before the Geneva Conventions were adopted by countries worldwide to protect medical personnel assisting the wounded on the battlefield. In 1864, the Geneva Conventions established the Red Cross emblem as the universal symbol of neutrality and protection in armed conflict. Soon after, the Red Cross emblem was also adopted to identify the humanitarian services of the Red Cross national societies.

Since its inception, in situations of armed conflict, the Red Cross emblem says “don’t shoot”—this person, building, vehicle or equipment is not part of the fight but is providing impartial assistance. In disasters big and small and wherever the Red Cross works to prevent and relieve suffering, the Red Cross emblem communicates that assistance is being provided by the Red Cross in keeping with the fundamental principles of the global Red Cross Movement of humanity, independence, neutrality, unity, impartiality, universality and voluntary service.

Who may use the Red Cross emblem?

Countries around the world protect the Red Cross emblem and limit its use to official Red Cross organizations and programs, as well as the medical services of their armed forces.

In the United States, only the American Red Cross and the medical corps of the Armed Forces are permitted by law to use the Red Cross emblem. The only exception to that important exclusivity was granted to the few U.S. companies that were already using a red cross emblem in their trademarks before 1906. One well-known example is Johnson & Johnson. Use of the Red Cross emblem by anyone else is not only prohibited, but also unlawful in the United States and around the world.



U.S. Army photo by Spc. Landon Stephenson/Released

The Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS *Comfort*.

Beware of the Law: What legal restrictions exist in the United States?

Congress understood the importance of protecting the Red Cross emblem and made its unauthorized use a crime in federal criminal statute 18 U.S.C. §706. This statute prohibits not just fraudulent use of the Red Cross emblem, but any use. In addition, the statute prohibits use of designs imitating the Red Cross emblem. The statute states:

- *Whoever wears or displays the sign of the Red Cross or any insignia colored in imitation thereof for the fraudulent purpose of inducing the belief that he is a member of or an agent for the American Red Cross; or*
- *Whoever, whether a corporation, association or person, other than the American National Red Cross and its duly authorized employees and agents and the sanitary and hospital authorities of the armed forces of the United States, uses the emblem of the Greek red cross on a white ground, or any sign or insignia made or colored in imitation thereof or the words “Red Cross” or “Geneva Cross” or any combination of these words—shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than six months or both. (18 U.S.C. § 706)*

Also, the symbol of the Greek cross in red is a trademark of the American Red Cross, and unauthorized use of the red cross symbol violates federal and state trademark laws, anti-dilution laws and unfair competition law. The American Red Cross owns multiple incontestable federal trademark registrations and significant common law trademark rights in the red cross symbol. Since as early as 1881, the American Red Cross has continuously used the red cross symbol in connection with numerous goods and services, including as related to fundraising, blood collection, health and safety, education and training, medical, dental, nursing, first aid, humanitarian aid, and emergency and disaster relief.



Red Cross Emergency Response Vehicle.

What is a Misuse?

Misuse occurs when an unauthorized party uses the Red Cross emblem without permission.

This includes designs of a cross of equal or substantially equal vertical and horizontal “arms” crossing in the middle in a shade of red or a color that can be mistaken for red (for example, maroon, magenta, dark pink, reddish orange). A misuse can either be a reproduction of the Red Cross emblem or the incorporation of the Red Cross emblem into a design. Misuses include red cross symbols that are:

- Slanted, tipped or italicized
- Thin or thick
- Outlined in a color other than red or partially filled in another color
- On a background other than white
- Included with a figure, symbol or word superimposed on it
- Broken into component parts that, when taken as a whole, appear as a red cross symbol
- Integrated as an element of a logo

More Than a Logo: Help protect the Red Cross symbol because it protects lives!

We frequently encounter a red cross symbol used on signs, in advertising or to indicate first aid stations, ambulances, emergency, health care or medical products, services or personnel that have nothing to do with the American Red Cross. Using a red cross symbol in such a way is wrong—and illegal. It violates federal law protecting the Red Cross emblem, and infringes upon the trademark rights of the American Red Cross. As importantly, it potentially puts future disaster response and other humanitarian efforts at risk. If people don't understand the meaning of the Red Cross emblem, they will not respect it.



Join us in helping to safeguard the meaning of the Red Cross emblem.

For over 150 years, the Global Red Cross Network has saved lives in times of disaster and conflict and the Red Cross emblem has identified that good work. Today, it is one of the most recognized symbols in the world for a very important reason.

Every day, Red Cross personnel work in regions experiencing disaster, health emergency, and armed conflict. Their ability to safely carry out a humanitarian mission and provide care and assistance depends on the recognition of the meaning of the Red Cross emblem. This is as important in the United States as it is around the world.

Help us protect the public, and the meaning and goodwill that the American Red Cross has accrued in the Red Cross symbol in over one hundred years of humanitarian service. Please do not use a red cross symbol in your signage, designs or logos. The Red Cross emblem is a protected symbol and is not descriptive for medical or emergency care, first aid or disaster response. This is misuse, and it diminishes the meaning and goodwill of the Red Cross emblem.

Why does the Red Cross emblem need protection?

The Red Cross emblem must remain universally recognized and respected throughout the world as a trusted symbol of protection, neutrality and humanitarian aid in the face of armed conflict and disaster. Red Cross workers put themselves at risk to help those suffering from disasters like hurricanes, floods and earthquakes, famine, disease and armed conflict around the world. They do so in the name of the Red Cross and under the protection of the Red Cross emblem. Red Cross workers carry no weapons. Their only shield is the Red Cross emblem that conveys the sense of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and service that is embodied in the worldwide Red Cross movement.

What can I use instead of the Red Cross?



Rod of Asclepius on red.



A white cross on a green background is used to indicate first aid and workplace/occupational health and safety.



A white 'H' on a blue background is commonly used on road signs to indicate a public hospital.



A white cross on a blue background is often used on road signs to indicate a public hospital.

How can I help stop misuse of the Red Cross emblem?

No misuse is too small to mention, because its timely correction could save a life. To report a misuse of the Red Cross emblem, please e-mail us at trademarks@redcross.org.

Please help us respect and protect the Red Cross emblem and educate others about its true meaning. For more information about the American Red Cross, please visit redcross.org.
