

Daily Union Article

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Topic: Emergency Plans for Families

I recently attended a meeting where a FCS colleague of mine from another county shared that she had recently been in the hospital. What started out as a Sunday trip to the emergency room for a respiratory problem quickly turned into a life and death situation. My friend shared that she was originally diagnosed with extensive pneumonia but it quickly turned to sepsis.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "sepsis is a complication caused by the body's overwhelming and life-threatening response to infection." It is quick to move and puts the body in a state of medical emergency. Although it can be difficult to diagnose, time is a critical factor in both the identification and treatment of the condition.

Sepsis is characterized by the following symptoms: Shivering, fever, or very cold; extreme pain or discomfort; clammy or sweaty skin; confusion or disorientation; shortness of breath; and increased heart rate. It can cause tissue damage, organ failure, and death.

There are some common infections that are more prone to lead to sepsis. The CDC reports that more than 90% of adults and 70% of children who developed sepsis had a health condition that may have contributed to the onset of sepsis. Among adults diagnosed with sepsis, 35% had a lung infection (e.g. pneumonia); 25% had a urinary tract infection or kidney infection; 11% had some type of gut infection; and 11% had a skin infection.

Being aware of the symptoms and some of the associated illnesses is important to prevention. It also should help you understand the importance of seeking medical attention earlier rather than later when you feel the effects of an infection in your body. Taking care of chronic illnesses can also help prevent the infection. Staying up to date on vaccinations and using good hygiene practices can serve as your first line of defense against infection.

In talking with my friend, her diagnosis wasn't the only part of the crisis. It put her family in crisis, as well. She thought she was making a trip to the emergency room for evaluation and treatment. She anticipated she would be back home within a few hours and left her 13 year old home alone with that in mind. As a single parent, it is likely that her son was accustomed to short periods of time where he was home alone. In this case though, it became evident that his stay at home was going to be extended. The doctors had to move her to a larger hospital out of town for treatment and she was being flown via helicopter to a hospital in the Kansas City area. Her the only family

member she had living close by was out of state at the time and her son's cell phone was apparently "dead" as she was not able to get through to him via text or voice message.

This raises the question "What plans have I made for my family in case of an emergency such as this or an emergency of any kind, for that matter?" If you have a plan, do the right people know what it is?

Your family may not be together with a crisis or emergency strikes so having a written plan in place can help each family member know what they need to do. The Department of Homeland Security has created an Emergency Communication Plan template that can be filled out and reviewed by families to aid them in the process of preparing for an emergency. See <https://www.ready.gov/make-a-plan>

The first step to creating a family emergency plan is to collect important information such as emergency contact information for your family, medical facilities your family is served by, family doctor names, schools, and other service providers. Create a paper copy of this information to keep at home and for a contact person you identify that lives out-of-town. This person becomes an additional contact for family members to reach out to in case of a wide-spread disaster or an emergency that effects your entire immediate family. If you have children in school or childcare, be familiar with the emergency plans for the buildings in which they attend.

Follow the plan up by making copies of your Family Emergency Plan for each member of the household to carry with them in their wallet, backpack, or purse. Put a copy in a central location in your home, as well. For example, place the completed contact sheet in a sleeve protector and put adhesive magnetic strips on the back so that it can be attached to the refrigerator door.

Put your plan into practice by discussing the steps each family member should take in the event of an emergency. When working with your children, use a variety of different scenarios to help explain what they need to do. Practice texting and making phone calls so that your children know how to explain themselves and the situation to emergency service professionals or family member contact. Explain what pieces of information are the most important and how to express them. A simple text that says "I'm OK. At library" offers the recipient of the text peace of mind and a location where their family member can be found. You might want to emphasize that they add their name if they are not using a family member's cell phone.

In life, we need to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Creating a family emergency communication plan can help put your mind at ease when a crisis strikes. For more information on creating your family's emergency plan, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!