Fundamentals of First Aid: Shock



What’s at Stake?

Any serious injury or illness will always trigger a series of responses in the body. If the injury or illness is severe such as an allergic reaction, heavy blood loss or sudden, severe pain, these triggers act like a chain of falling dominoes and can send the person into the condition called shock. Shock is the body shutting down nonessential activities so that it can focus on getting enough blood and oxygen to the main organs – the heart, lungs, and brain.

What’s the Danger?

The effects of shock can be quite significant but there are ways to reduce the effect of shock on the person. However, it must be remembered that shock is a response to something else. The event that caused the shock must be managed, if you know what it is. Sometimes, the person can go into shock even though the injury or illness seems quite mild. If someone goes into shock, they require immediate medical attention because left untreated, shock can be fatal.

How to Protect Yourself

3 simple steps to help someone in shock

1. Keep yourself safe
   - Call 911.
   - Assess the scene.
   - Proceed with care only if it’s safe to do so-check the cause of the shock i.e. the initial injury or event.
2. Know the signs of shock
   - Cool, clammy skin
   - Pale or ashen skin
   - Rapid pulse
   - Rapid breathing
   - Nausea or vomiting
   - Enlarged pupils
   - Weakness or fatigue
   - Dizziness or fainting
   - Changes in mental status or behavior, such as anxiousness or agitation

3. While you wait for the EMS team

- Have the victim lie down if they are able and it does not cause pain.
    - This is often the most comfortable position.
    - Helping the victim rest comfortably is important because pain can intensify the body’s stress and accelerate the progression of shock.
- Control any external bleeding.
- Elevate the legs about 12-inches, unless you suspect head, neck, or back injuries or possible broken bones involving the hips or legs.
    - If you are unsure of the victim’s condition, leave him or her lying flat.
- Help the victim maintain normal body temperature.
    - If the victim is cool, try to cover him or her to avoid chilling.
- Do not give the victim anything to eat or drink, even though he or she is likely to be thirsty.
- Reassure the victim.
- If the person vomits or begins bleeding from the mouth, turn him or her onto a side to prevent choking, unless you suspect a spinal injury.

Final Word

Shock is a serious condition and urgent medical assistance is needed. Your first aid role is to keep the person calm, warm, and comfortable until help arrives. If the cause of the shock, such as bleeding, is obvious, do what you can to stop the bleeding.