Is Your Workplace Prepared for a Medical Emergency?

We have all heard the Boy Scout motto, "Be prepared." According to the Boy Scout Handbook, Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting, was once asked, "Be prepared for what?"

"Why, for any old thing," he replied.

Baden-Powell's response neatly sums up how businesses should view their on-site medical emergency preparedness program. But "any old thing" covers a lot of ground. Are there any guidelines companies can follow to ensure they are moving in the right direction?

The first place businesses should turn for guidance on matters of workplace health and safety is OSHA. There are two main OSHA standards that apply to medical emergency preparedness, but interestingly enough, they are not as comprehensive as other agency standards.

The first of these is 29 CFR 1910.151, the "Access to Medical Care" standard. This standard indicates the need for adequate first aid supplies, and creates some employer requirements for training. When pressed for elaboration of the standard, OSHA responded that if a workplace has the possibility for severe, life-threatening hazards, medical care must be provided within 3 to 4 minutes of the emergency occurring. In the absence of such a hazard, the employer is required to provide medical care within 15 minutes. If a jobsite is so remote that municipal emergency service is not available within these specified time frames, the employer must provide employees training in CPR and first aid.

The second OSHA standard that applies is 29 CFR 1910.1030, the "Blood-borne Pathogens" standard. Employees who may come into contact with blood or bodily fluid as a result of activities within the workplace must be trained. Employees who are assigned to perform first-aid duties must be given specific training in handling blood in order to comply with this standard. In some cases, employees may need to be vaccinated for Hepatitis B.

Since these OSHA standards are not crystal clear, companies should consider a medical emergency audit to determine what types of training and equipment are needed to keep employees prepared.

One of the most basic forms of preparedness training is CPR and first aid. Be sure the first aid training you provide employees includes handling emergencies that are specific to your work site. Employees also need to know where to find medical supplies and appropriate procedures for reporting a medical emergency. Your medical emergency program should have a coordinator who is accountable for maintaining a well-stocked first aid kit and evaluating individual situations to determine if an injured employee needs further medical treatment. In the event additional care is needed, the coordinator would be responsible for calling the local municipal emergency medical service.

If your workplace includes a significant number of older workers, you should consider purchasing an Automated External Defibrillator (AED). Although states differ with regard to the operation of an AED on a public site, most state statutes provide liability immunity for the owner and users if they have taken CPR and AED training, the device is maintained according to the manufacturer's specifications and all other mandates outlined by law are followed.