

LIVING ALONE WITH NO ONE TO HELP IN A MEDICAL EMERGENCY

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As I slowly opened my eyes, I was shocked to see a blurry outline of the bottom of my dresser directly in front of me. That meant that I was lying on my bedroom floor! My heart began to pound. "Oh, no", I thought, "I must have passed out when I was getting out of bed!" I knew immediately that I was going to need help but there wasn't anyone living in my house who could come to my aid. My mind quickly shifted into gear as I acknowledged my predicament and considered my options.

"My diabetes must have caused me to pass out from hypoglycemia (low blood sugar)," I realized, "which means my physical coordination is so impaired that I won't have enough strength to stand up on my own. That eliminates all possibility of being able to get to a phone to call for help. It looks as though it's the middle of the night which means that no one is likely to hear me if I yell for help. How am I going to muster up the mobility to reach the necessary sugar supplies that I need to restore my body's physical strength?"

With a great deal of effort and determination, I finally managed to drag my body across the bedroom floor to the nightstand on top of which my glucose (sugar) supplies lay. With labored and disciplined effort, I was able to reach up and knock the glucose tablets onto the floor so that I could clumsily get them into my mouth. After what seemed like an eternity, the combination of my body's fear-based adrenaline and the ingested glucose saved my life that night. But that terrifying experience made me realize that I had to come up with a medical emergency plan to better protect myself in the future.

Living alone can be challenging on many fronts, but when it comes to medical emergencies, it can be life-threatening. People with chronic illnesses are particularly vulnerable because they're more susceptible to the chance that a medical emergency can occur. For this reason, it's very important to create a plan that will provide a "safety-net" in the event of an unexpected emergency.

Here are some options to consider in devising a medical emergency plan:

1. Have a medical alert system set up in your home. This is the type of system that is frequently advertised on TV (for the elderly). It is connected to your phone and you wear a necklace around your neck that contains a button you can push in an emergency. The button alerts the system to notify either a friend, family member or 911 that you need help.

2. Ask a close friend or family member to be your emergency resource. This requires a great deal of preparation and planning, but it can be preferable to having the system call 911. Your local fire department (paramedics) will have to

force entry into your house to rescue you and they may not be familiar with your particular medical history or needs. A friend or family member can be instructed how to attend to your medical needs in an emergency and they can be given a key for easy access into your home. It helps to make a list of your medications, your doctor's number, and a step-by-step outline of what to do to help you in the emergency. Also spell out instructions for locating the medical equipment or supplies you may need in such a circumstance. Give the list to this person in advance and explain any details.

3. Make provisions for emergencies in which this person may not be available to help. Create a "Plan B" for times during which your friend or family may not be available to help you. Most medical alert systems will ask you to list a second alternative to contact during emergencies. If 911 is your backup resource, call your local fire department in advance and let them know your medical needs in an emergency. Post medical instructions (including your medications, your doctor's name and number, and the location of any medical equipment or supplies you may need in the emergency) close to your front door and notify the fire department that they are there.

4. Make arrangements with more than one friend or family member to check in on you on a regular basis. A "buddy system" is really a must for people who live alone, especially for those with a medical vulnerability. Develop a plan in which you and a friend or family member check in with each other every day. If that responsibility seems too overwhelming for one person, recruit others to help carry the load. Perhaps 2-3 people could split up the week.

5. Understand the complications that come with these emergency strategies. These emergency responsibilities can feel like a burden to both you and your friends or family members. Loved ones can worry unnecessarily if they don't find you at home for extended periods of time and they can't reach you by phone. This may result in unnecessary trips to your home to check on you. It can feel quite burdensome to you to have to constantly inform these resource people of your whereabouts. You may forget to call them and your cell phone may be turned off and they can become annoyed with you for neglecting to check in with them and letting them know that you are okay. It's best to be prepared for a trial and error period with this type of plan. It's also important to remember that whatever inconvenience this type of plan creates, it's better than the possibly life-threatening alternative.

Living alone doesn't have to be risky or dangerous if we take precautions to safeguard our health and well-being by being prepared in the event of an unexpected medical emergency. A few simple steps and a lot of forethought and preparation can put your mind at rest and ultimately save your life.