

March 2016 Safety Article: The ABCs of "Oops!" - Part III

Over the last two months we have discussed some of the priority items one needs to address in the event of a motorcycling accident, by using the acronym "SLABCAB". This acronym has helped us address potential life threats including scene safety and spinal immobilization, level of consciousness of the victim, airway, breathing, and circulation. Continuing with the acronym, the second "A" instructs us to manage any arterial bleeds.

The body can lose blood quickly when an artery is severed. Arteries are the blood vessels that run directly from the heart and the blood inside is being pushed with a large amount of pressure enabling it to be pushed into the capillaries and carry nutrients across cell membranes to keep the cells living. I, personally, have witnessed arterial bleeding that has shot six feet or more out of the wound in which an artery was severed. With that kind of pressure pushing blood out of the body, a drop in blood volume can happen quickly. Life becomes exceedingly difficult to maintain with only a 20% loss in blood volume, internally or externally. Arterial bleeding can be identified with the description of "bright red and spurting". The bright red color comes from the blood exiting the heart and being full of the nutrients and components that support life. Any time you see blood spurting, it is an immediate life threat and needs to be managed.

Managing an arterial bleed is relatively simple. If you see blood, quickly and firmly, push down on the injury with the heel your hand to apply pressure. Find any kind of medical dressing or cloth and tightly press or clamp down on the wound site. This will slow the bleeding and aid the body's natural clotting features to begin working while 911 is called. Another tactic is to, if possible, raise the injury above the level of the heart along with holding pressure. This allows you to use gravity to assist in slowing the flow of blood to the injury site.

Blood loss is also a cause in the reduction of blood pressure. If the victim feels faint while awaiting the arrival of emergency responders, have the victim lie down with their feet slightly elevated, like on top of a rolled-up leather jacket. This will help gravity direct blood back to the vital organs of the body and maintain appropriate blood movement in the heart and brain. Make sure, if possible, to not increase blood flow to the area of injury.

Once pressure is applied, do not let go until instructed to do so by emergency responders assuming care. If the bleeding continues, pack on more gauze. If it still continues, pack on more, and then pack on even more. While a Paramedic student doing my rotations in a hospital, I was once assigned to hold pressure on an elderly lady's arm for the entire eight-hour shift while she awaited surgery to repair the torn artery. She took blood thinners and the normal clotting functions were diminished because of this. Be aware, this can be the case with anyone taking blood thinners. If you take blood thinners, or have a blood-clotting disorder, please disclose this information to your emergency responders.

There are items that can help with arterial bleeds if holding pressure and continuing to pack on gauze are not sufficient. Makeshift, and commercially available, tourniquets are routinely used at pressure points between the heart and the site of injury. If in an extremity, make sure to confirm a pulse being present in the extremity, away from the injury, before and after their use as you do not wish to choke off complete blood flow to an artery. If numbness, tingling or discoloration follows tourniquet application, discontinue use. They are also indicated only for short-term use.

Many times bleeding has been successfully slowed using pressure dressings or chemicals known as "Quik-clot", "Celox", or other commercially available names. These items should be used as a last resort if emergency medical responders are significantly delayed or not available for an extended period of time. Make sure you are very familiar with the usage of any device or clotting agent before implementation. During the time of emergency is not the time to be opening and learning how to use a new treatment. Open the packaging and read the instructions, and do so again from time to time to keep the information fresh. A suggestion would be to order multiple devices and use one for practice, as muscle memory is a great way to aid you in appropriate application during times of distress.

Do yourself, your friends, and your loved ones a favor and learn how to appropriately stop major bleeding as these accidents can happen at anytime, and not only when riding motorcycles. It is a good practice to keep a few large gauze pads at different locations throughout your house, in your vehicles, in your briefcase, with cutting devices such as saws and axes, in toolboxes, and purses, as well as in the storage spaces on your motorcycle or pockets of your leather jacket. If you ride with others, share with them where your first aid kit is located as you may very well be the one that needs to have assistance provided for you!

Could it make sense to tape, paint or mark on a small red cross to the bag where your first aid kit is located? Just food for thought. It may or may not be part of the look you wish to have for your motorcycle, but dying roadside from an arterial bleed isn't much of a flattering look either. Think about it...

...and "Hey! Let's be careful out there!"

- By Matt Thomason