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CPR training guidelines set to change in Canada

New process aims to simplify the process and save more lives

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Toronto — A new set of international CPR guidelines has been introduced in Canada that aims to simplify the process and save more lives.

The latest wisdom on CPR advocates a delivery that offers more chest compressions and less ventilation, at a rate of two rescue breaths for every 30 compressions.

Previously, the guidelines advocated 15 compressions to every two breaths.

"This is the most significant series of changes in a sense that it makes training easier and, we think, easier to remember," Dr. Anthony Graham, spokesman for the Heart and Stroke Foundation, said Monday.

The latest research shows this rate is most effective to keep a cardiac arrest victim alive in the early stages, before the paramedics or a portable defibrillator can be called in to help jump-start the heart.

The key to this latest change is to encourage more people to take immediate action, said Dr. Graham. The guidelines are typically reviewed every five years.

Mary Jane McGill was putting groceries away in the kitchen earlier this year when she heard her husband Bob thump to the floor down the hall.

She thought for a second that he might be kidding when he didn't respond to her call, but when she rushed to his side and saw the blood streaming from his nose and ears she realized the worst: He had gone into cardiac arrest.

"This was my husband of 22 years and he was dying on me," she said.

Mrs. McGill immediately began a CPR sequence she learned more than two decades ago. It was a panicked fumble to breathe for him and keep his heart beating until help could arrive.

The doctors say she saved his life.

"When you love somebody and he's your life, you're going to do everything you can to hang onto them," she said.

Right now, fewer than five per cent of those who suffer cardiac arrest outside of a hospital survive. Dr. Graham said he hopes that once the new guidelines are implemented, that number will rise to closer to two-thirds.

There are an estimated 45,000 cases of cardiac arrest in Canada each year — 80 per cent of them at home.

"The reason people learn to do CPR is hopefully to save the life of someone they know and love," Dr. Graham said.

Also included in the recommendation is a new course design that will allow people to learn how to perform CPR in less time.

"We know that to get training out to the general public, it has to be practical and it has to be as easy as possible," he said.

And while refresher courses are suggested for anybody who receives this potentially life-saving training, Dr. Graham said the older methods aren't wrong — they just aren't the most effective.

Each year, about a million Canadians receive training in CPR with materials based on the Heart and Stroke Foundation's guidelines.

The latest science reviewed by the International Liaison Committee on Resuscitation in setting the guidelines shows that it takes a few compressions to get blood flowing through vital organs. Stopping too soon — even to administer a rescue breath — is less effective.

The new system also does away with a pre-CPR pulse check since even medical professionals in controlled hospital settings have a hard time reliably establishing a heartbeat that way.

Despite the widespread myth, beginning CPR on a patient with a beating heart does little harm, said Tracey Braun, the National First Aid Co-ordinator for the Red Cross.

"Basically, your heart's an electrical system. By pushing on the chest, you'd have to be breaking a lot of ribs before interfering with the electrical system," she said.

"It's the same as my picking up your computer cord and squeezing it. Would I affect your computer?"

The changes are the most significant since CPR's inception in the 1960s, according to the foundation.

The agencies that deliver first aid and CPR training in Canada — the Red Cross, St. John Ambulance, Lifesaving Society and Canadian Ski Patrol — will meet Friday to determine how to adopt the international recommendations.

It is expected the latest guidelines will be implemented at training courses by next summer.

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