

Safety Tip of the Month – June 2006
VSI Safety Committee

“Just a Little Chest Pain”

You are serving as Marshal at a large outdoor long course meet. It is very hot... 95 degrees in the shade! You overhear a coach state that he is having a little chest pain, which just won't go away. One of his assistant coaches gives him some antacid tablets and two aspirin. An hour later, you observe this coach collapse at the far end of the pool. The rescue squad is summoned and arrives within 10 minutes, and the coach is transported to the nearest hospital. You learn later that the coach sustained a massive heart attack and remained in the coronary care unit for nearly a week as he slowly recovered.

This is a typical scenario for some individuals who experience sudden chest pain. These symptoms should NOT be ignored. Causes of sudden, acute chest pain include early stages of myocardial ischemia (angina), pulmonary embolus (blood clot in the lung), aortic dissection (gradual tearing of the great vessel leaving the heart), pneumothorax (collapsed lung), pericarditis (inflammation of the heart's outer protective sac), and ruptured esophagus. Each of these situations may occur fairly suddenly, and will generally not be relieved with rest or medication. They each constitute a life threatening medical emergency. These events related to sudden chest pain may occur in teens and young adults, as well as older adults.

When a person complains of sudden chest pain, you should summon help (yelling works, if at a large swim meet, or use a cell phone if by yourself) AND stay with the person. Help the person to obtain the most comfortable position possible, which is usually a sitting posture with the head / torso tilted forward. If the person states that he takes nitroglycerin for “heart pain,” you may offer to assist him/ her in locating this pill container so that he/she can administer the medication. If the natatorium has an automatic external defibrillator (AED), familiarize yourself with its location. Loosen any tight clothing around the person's neck. While waiting for the rescue squad, the life guards (or yourself) may opt to take a brief medical history ... this will be of great benefit to the emergency medical technicians when they arrive.

Proactive addressing of sudden chest pain provides the EARLY mobilization of essential health care personnel and may save a person's life.