

Health and Safety

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A Shocking Possibility

Preparing restaurants for the threat of sudden cardiac arrest

Picture this: It's a busy Saturday night in your restaurant. Wait staff are taking orders, chefs are preparing meals and bussers are clearing tables as the line of hungry patrons continues to grow. Suddenly, everything stops when you hear the words that cause instant panic—"HELP! He's not breathing!"

As the restaurant owner, you quickly turn around and see a customer lying on the floor. You don't know what happened, and you freeze. Thankfully, a pair of quick-acting nurses who just finished their shift at the local hospital rush to his side and begin performing CPR. One nurse yells out, "Someone call 9-1-1 and bring me an AED!"

You panic. Your restaurant doesn't have an AED, so you grab the phone and call for an ambulance, which arrives 10 minutes after your customer collapsed. The EMS whisks him away to the local hospital, and you are left with a pit in your stomach.

The guest in your restaurant likely suffered a sudden cardiac arrest (SCA), the leading cause of death in the United States, claiming the lives of more than 400,000 Americans each year.

What is SCA?

SCA is an abrupt, unexpected loss of heart function caused by an electrical disturbance in the heart. SCA disturbs the heart's rhythm, causing a cessation of blood flow through the body. Unlike a heart attack, which generally comes with a number of recognizable symptoms, SCA tends to strike without warning. Its death toll surpasses that of breast cancer, motor vehicle accidents, murder, stroke, prostate cancer and leukemia—combined.

With the average American dining out five times per week, the likelihood of an SCA emergency occurring in a restaurant is higher than one might think. Although restaurants cannot predict when an SCA may happen, fortunately, there are actionable steps that can be taken in order to combat the extremely prevalent health risk. Studies show that when a victim is shocked with an AED within three minutes of a collapse, SCA survival rates can exceed 70 percent, up from a mere 8 percent without rapid intervention.

Despite the fact that a recent Harris Interactive survey found that two out of every five Americans now expect to find AEDs in restaurants, all too often restaurants are not prepared. When an SCA emergency occurs, many eateries are ill-prepared or unequipped to react, and must solely rely on prompt arrival of emergency personnel. But, with EMS arrival time averaging eight minutes or more and because the odds of surviving SCA drop about 10 percent with each minute that passes, waiting for EMS assistance is not practical in most circumstances. Appreciating the likelihood of SCA, the effectiveness of AEDs and the expectations of their diners, restaurant owners need to ask, "Is our facility properly prepared to handle an SCA emergency?"

Prepping for the Mealtime Rush

If a restaurant is adequately equipped to handle an SCA emergency with the right equipment and training, lives can and will be saved. When prepping for the influx of diners, restaurant facility owners should consider prepping for SCA. If the building is properly equipped with readily available AEDs, it does not take a medical professional to help a person in need—anyone in the restaurant can be a first responder.

As a restaurant owner, health concerns are familiar territory. Managers hire trained chefs to oversee proper food safety and sanitation. On a staff member's first day, he or she is trained in the Heimlich maneuver and shown where the fire extinguishers and first aid kits reside. As SCA claims the lives of one person every two minutes in the U.S., incorporating CPR and AED training into employee onboarding will ensure that all staff members are prepared from day one to react in the event of an emergency.

Employees may be wary of AED devices because they have the false impression they are difficult to use. But, in fact, recent studies have shown that students as young as sixth grade are able to properly deploy an AED in only seconds longer than it takes for trained medical personnel to use the device. The devices provide helpful visual and verbal instructions and have built-in safeguards that ensure that the AED only shocks a person in need, eliminating fear of improper use. Additionally, statewide Good Samaritan laws protect laypeople who use AEDs to assist an SCA victim from liability, ensuring that no one has to be afraid to offer help when it is needed.

AEDs are simple to install, easy to use and surprisingly inexpensive. The device, along with the appropriate training needed to learn how to operate it, amounts to less than \$3 a day—less than the cost of a side of French fries or a scoop of ice cream at most restaurants. Installing defibrillators in restaurants is not only cost-efficient, but it is the right thing to do to protect valued employees and patrons.

Implementing a Preparedness Program

In addition to CPR and AED training, a tailored, facility-specific emergency response program will help to effectively combat SCA. Emergency response programs are unique to each restaurant and help to ensure that all employees understand how to react should an SCA emergency occur.

Program implementation begins with an assessment of the restaurant to determine how many employees should be trained and how many AEDs are necessary to adequately equip the establishment. Although training has historically been conducted via in-person sessions, online solutions can provide effective and convenient alternatives. Research has demonstrated the efficacy of online training, which allows for broader, easier access and more uniform quality.

It is important that the AED devices are easily accessible from all areas of the restaurant—often, near the hostess stand or in another central location is best. Trained professionals can help to determine what devices will best suit the facility and can aid in the communication of the program to employees. In addition, they can assist with installing a framework that makes it easy to properly maintain the devices, as well as work with restaurant owners to ensure complete compliance with state-specific laws.

Safeguarding Every Restaurant

Whether in a fine dining, casual or quick-serve restaurant, implementing an emergency response program and having readily available AEDs cultivates employee loyalty and allows customers to feel that they are protected and valued. Many employees view the training as a personal benefit—it can not only be used in the restaurant, but outside of work, too. Customers who realize the time and energy a restaurant owner puts into their personal safety are likely to keep coming back (and recommending a business) for years to come.

Program implementation can also result in unparalleled positive brand impact. SCA preparations and the resulting lives that are sure to be saved generate highly favorable press and recognition for those restaurants that choose to meet the SCA challenge head-on.

A Better Outcome

In revisiting the scenario previously presented, if restaurant employees were properly trained in CPR and AED usage, the patron in need of help could have been treated with greater speed and ease, astronomically increasing his chance of survival.

With hundreds of diners walking through the doors of a restaurant on any given day, facility managers must be prepared for the myriad emergencies that may occur—especially SCA. The promising outcomes and survival rates associated with AED use should encourage restaurant owners to take steps to protect their staff, their customers and their brand from this remarkably underappreciated health risk. Preparing for SCA in the United States effectively positions a restaurant as a leader in the community, fully committed to the health and safety of everyone who enters its doors. At the end of the day, that makes everyone a happy customer.

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