

F.2 UNCONSCIOUSNESS

Unconsciousness is a state in which the casualty becomes insensible to commands because of an interruption to the normal functioning of the brain. A person has perhaps lost consciousness if he does not react to your action by opening his eyes or answering your questions.

There is no absolute dividing line between consciousness and unconsciousness. People can be fully conscious (aware and awake) or fully unconscious (no reaction to any stimulus) or at any level between these two extremes.



Loss of consciousness causes the muscles to relax. During the period of unconsciousness the tongue might fall backwards and block the breathing passage.

In fainting, the unconscious state is usually brief as in *vasovagal syncope*. Fainting can occur due to various reasons such as emotional distress, tiredness, hunger, standing up for long period, a sudden change in body position, being a long time in a hot environment, or specific medical conditions. Pregnant women, children and the elderly can be more vulnerable to these causes.

Longer periods of unconsciousness are more serious. Causes include head injuries, cardiac arrest, stroke or poisoning.

In an unconscious state, the person will be unresponsive to your activities (touching, sounds or other stimulation).

Check the following:

- Whether the person opens his eyes and responds to simple questions:
 - "What is your name?"
 - "Where do you live?"
 - "How old are you?"
- Whether the person responds to simple commands:
 - "Squeeze my hand."
 - "Move your arm/leg/foot/hand."
- If there is no response, pinch the person and see if he opens his eyes or moves.

If the person does not react to any of these stimuli, he is in an unconscious state.



Note that a person might only partially respond to the stimuli you provide (sound, touch, pain); he might be in an in-between state.

When the person becomes conscious again after a period of unconsciousness, he might suffer from:

- confusion,
- drowsiness,
- light-headedness,
- headache,
- loss of bowel and bladder control (incontinence),

- fits, and
- difficulty speaking.

i The first aider can measure and record a patient's responsiveness and level of consciousness using the AVPU scale (see chapter on basic first aid techniques).

F.2.1 CAUSES OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS

There are many causes of unconsciousness and it can occur as a result of a:

- head injury resulting in a concussion of the brain or a compression of the brain due to swelling or bleeding;
- disturbance of the blood supply to the brain, as in fainting, shock or stroke;
- disturbance in the chemical composition of the blood, e.g. lack of oxygen as in asphyxia, abnormal blood sugar levels in diabetes or presence of poisonous substances in the blood; or
- disturbance in the electrical activity of the brain, e.g. as in epilepsy.

F.2.2 WHAT DO I DO?

F.2.2.1 SAFETY FIRST AND CALL FOR HELP

1. Make sure there is no danger to you, the person or bystanders.

F.2.2.2 PROVIDE FIRST AID

2. Talk loudly to the casualty. Tap him on the shoulders and ask if he is ok. Do not shake the person too roughly.
3. Check if the casualty is conscious or unconscious and act accordingly.



To do so:

- a. Talk loudly to person, shake him gently
- b. Check if the person opens his eyes and responds to simple questions:
 - 'What is your name?'
 - 'Where do you live?'
 - 'How old are you?'
- c. Check if the injured person responds to simple commands:
 - "Squeeze my hand?"

- "Move your arm/leg/foot/hand"

- d. If there is no response, pinch the person and check if he opens his eyes or moves.

i The first aider can measure and record a patient's responsiveness and level of consciousness using the AVPU scale (see chapter on basic first aid techniques).

F.2.2.2.1 WHAT DO I DO WHEN THE CASUALTY RESPONDS?

1. Try not to change the position of the person if there has been a head, neck, back, leg or arm injury.
2. Try to find out what happened to the person.
3. Tell the person to stay calm and not to move (if at all possible).



4. Look and feel for breathing
5. Keep checking the casualty to make sure he is not getting worse.
6. Verify regularly the level of consciousness and breathing.
7. Find medical help for the person if needed.

F.2.2.2.2 WHAT DO I DO WHEN THE CASUALTY DOES NOT RESPOND?

1. Try not to change the position of the person if there has been a head, neck, back, leg or arm injury.



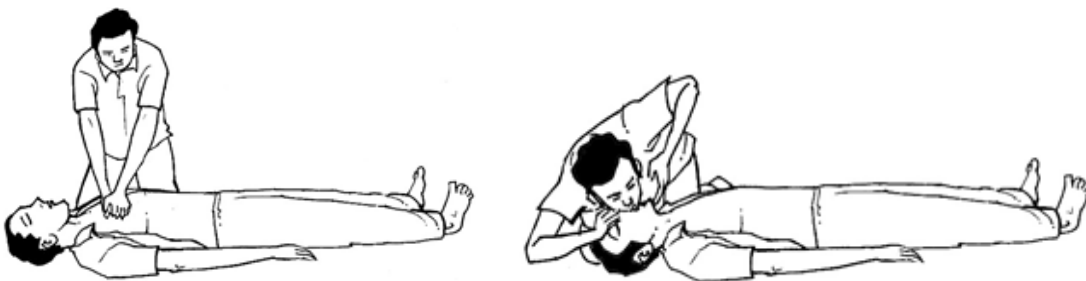
2. The injured person urgently needs help. Shout or call for help if you are alone but do not leave the person unattended. Ask a bystander to seek help or to arrange urgent transport to the nearest healthcare facility. Tell him to come back to you to confirm if help has been secured.
3. If you have gloves, put them on. Do not search for gloves if not available and continue with the next step.

4. You must unblock the breathing passage:
 - a. Gently roll the person over on to his back.
 - b. Carefully tilt his head back and lift the chin up with your hand on the bony part of the chin. This simple action lifts the tongue from the back of the throat.
 - c. Do not put your hand on the soft part under the chin to do this!



5. If the person is breathing, put him in the recovery position.
 - a. Be careful when moving and turning the victim. It is better to ask assistance by bystanders.
 - b. Do not leave the person alone and keep checking his breathing.
 - c. Keep the injured person warm by taking off wet clothing, covering him with a blanket or other covering, taking care not to overheat him.
6. If not done yet, arrange transport to a healthcare facility.

F.2.2.2.3 WHAT DO I DO WHEN THE PERSON STOPS BREATHING?



Perform CPR.

Do not interrupt the resuscitation until:

- the victim starts to wake up, moves, opens his eyes and breathes normally
- help (trained in CPR) arrives and takes over;
- you become too exhausted to continue; or
- the scene becomes unsafe for you to continue.

F.2.2.2.4 HYGIENE

Always wash your hands after taking care of a person. Use soap and water to wash your hands. If no soap is available, you can use ash to wash your hands. Alcohol-based sanitizers can also be used, if available.

F.2.3 WHEN TO REFER TO A HEALTHCARE FACILITY?



Always urgently transport an unconscious person to the nearest healthcare facility.



Anyone who has become unconscious or who is feeling sick, has pain after fainting (e.g. in the head or heart region, or from trauma resulting from the fall), is on medication or is being treated for a medical condition, should always seek medical help.