

Recovery Position

People can become non-responsive or unconscious for a variety of reasons, including the use of alcohol or other drugs. The 'recovery position' is used to protect the airway of an unconscious person and is a simple way to help keep people safer.

Knowing how and when to use the recovery position can save a life, but it is important to understand why, how and when to use it. Some points to note include:

- **the recovery position is the safest short-term position for a patient whilst waiting for medical aid, but not for long-**

term management

- **done correctly, the recovery position should not cause any harm to the patient**
- **drunk people can get cold very quickly so it is important to keep them warm whilst waiting for help to arrive**
- **never leave someone who is drunk or non-responsive alone, always stay with them and get help**

**BEING UNCONSCIOUS IS A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.
ALWAYS CALL AN AMBULANCE**

People can become non-responsive or unconscious for a variety of reasons, including the use of alcohol or other drugs. Being unconscious is a medical emergency and always requires an ambulance. The 'recovery position' is used to protect the airway of an unconscious person and is a simple way to help keep them safer.

What happens when you are unconscious?

When you are unresponsive or unconscious, all of your muscles relax. This can be a problem in three ways:

- if you are unconscious and lying on your back, the tongue (which is a large muscle attached to the jaw), can move back and block your airway, affecting your ability to breathe properly
- when you are conscious, you are able to cough or vomit if your airway becomes blocked. This is called a gag reflex. Unconscious people lose their gag reflex, which means they can't clear their airway on their own and this can lead to choking
- when someone is unconscious, a muscle at the top of the stomach, called a sphincter (which contracts to keep all of the stomach contents from coming back up into the throat) relaxes. This allows whatever is in your stomach (e.g., vomit, acid, etc) to move up into your airway and possibly drain into your lungs. This can lead to choking or the acid damaging the delicate lung tissue

Why do we put people on their side when they are unconscious?

When someone is unconscious we are mostly concerned about their airway. If the airway becomes blocked they cannot breathe properly and can die. By placing someone on their side gravity allows the tongue to fall forward, opening up the airway. If there is anything blocking the airway (such as vomit), it can drain forward into the mouth, which is safer than sitting in the airway or draining into the lungs.

It is important to remember that the recovery position is the safest place for an unconscious person to be *whilst you are waiting for medical assistance*. It does not fix the problem.

Being unconscious for any reason is a medical emergency and always requires an ambulance.

How to put someone into the recovery position

Unconscious people always need an ambulance so, if you are with others, make sure one of them is calling for help while you are putting the person into the recovery position.

You need to do the following:

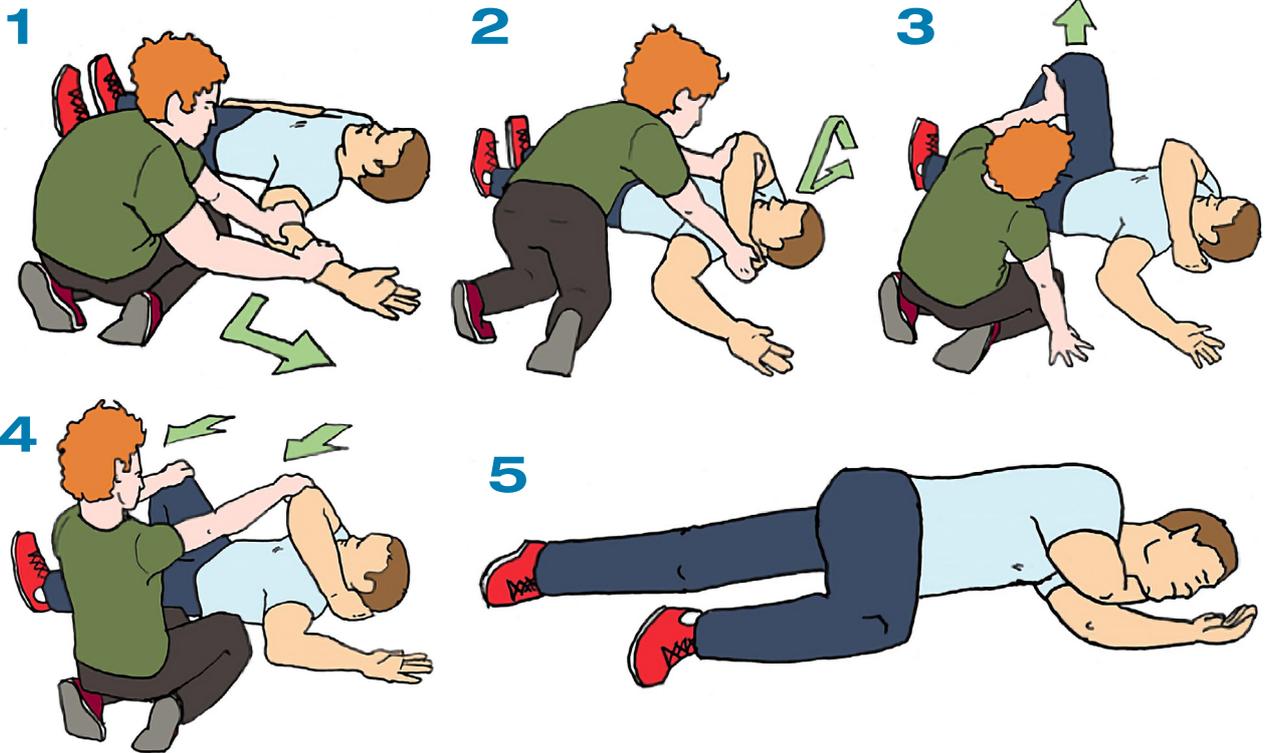
- place the lower arm sideways away from the body in the direction you are going to roll the patient
- bend the opposite arm across the body

Medical Disclaimer

The information provided on this fact sheet is provided for information purposes only. As such it **cannot substitute for the advice of a medical professional**

First published January 2020

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- bend up the opposite leg
- roll the unconscious person onto their side
- roll gently, protecting the head and neck
- ensure the bent knee is all the way over and not leaning on the other leg. This will stop them rolling onto their face
- stay with them until help arrives

You should also note the following:

- it doesn't matter if you roll the patient towards you or away from you, but be aware if they roll towards you they may vomit so keep clear
- try to keep the person warm as they can be at risk of hypothermia (for more information see the [Alcohol and Hypothermia](#) fact sheet)

Should I put them into the recovery position before calling 000?

If there is more than one person to help, get someone to place the patient in the recovery position whilst you call for assistance. It is quick and easy to put someone in the recovery position so if you are on your own you should be able to do it before you ring for help. If you don't have a phone on you and have to leave to call for help, place the patient on their side and then go for assistance. This is the safest position for them until you return.

Can putting someone in the recovery position make them worse?

Done correctly the recovery position should not cause any harm to the patient. The following points, however, are important to remember:

- if someone is non-responsive or unconscious they must be on their side to help protect their airway
- it is important that they are in a stable position (with their lower arm extended and the knee bent over) to ensure they don't roll onto their face and block their airway
- unconscious people get very cold so attempt to roll them onto a blanket or jacket to protect from the cold ground and place another blanket over them whilst you are waiting
- if it is safe to do so always stay with the person and watch them carefully. The 000 operator will instruct you if you need to do anything further

The recovery position is always a temporary measure whilst you are waiting for medical help.