To learn more about trauma care, visit nationalacademies.org/TraumaCare

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You may not think of it as a public health issue, but did you know that trauma—a potentially disabling or life-threatening injury that results from an event such as a motor vehicle crash, gun violence, or fall—is the leading cause of death in the United States for those ages 46 and under?

Of the 147,790 U.S. deaths from trauma in 2014, roughly 20% might have been preventable if appropriate and timely medical care had been delivered after injury. This equates to nearly 30,000 preventable deaths in a single year.

There is great variation in the quality of trauma care and outcomes for injured patients across the United States. In fact, there is a 2-fold difference in mortality rates between the best- and worst-performing trauma centers. In other words, where you are injured may determine whether you survive.

In the initial moments after an injury occurs, you as a bystander can deliver immediate lifesaving care before EMS personnel arrive.

If you have been seriously injured, be engaged in decisions about your care as much as possible. Patients, families, and care providers can work together, making decisions that take into account your preferences, life circumstances, and values.

Participate in processes that work to improve trauma care, including taking part in trauma research. The public has an important role to play in advocating for and supporting trauma systems.

Patients, families, and other caregivers can use their firsthand experiences to identify areas in need of improvement in the trauma care system.

Zero preventable deaths after injury and best possible recovery is an achievable aim, and the benefits are clear: to protect those the nation sends into harm’s way in combat and to help save the lives of all Americans.