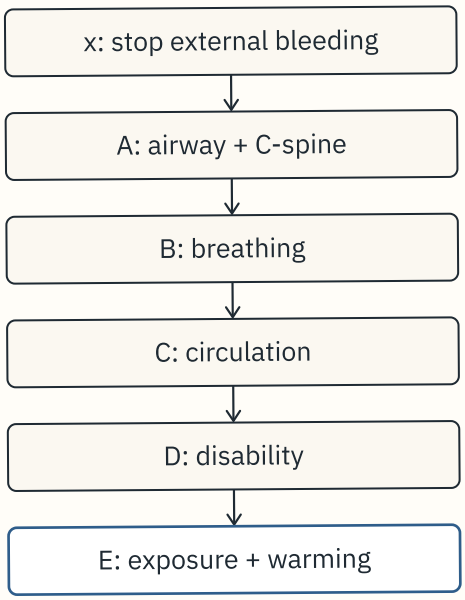
Trauma primary survey: xABCDE

Treat the fastest killer first



Step by step

1. Stop exsanguinating external bleeding first
2. Secure the airway with the spine protected
3. Treat each threat the moment you find it
4. Keep the patient warm

Step	Key action
x	Direct pressure, then tourniquet
A	Airway, spine protected; tube if needed
B	Find the immediate chest threats
C	Two large-bore lines, blood, TXA, FAST
D	GCS, pupils, limbs, glucose
E	Undress, then warm

The sequence and its key action

Rule of thumb

x, A, B, C, D, E: stop exsanguinating bleeding, then airway

Tranexamic acid as early as possible, within 3 hours

Glasgow Coma Scale below 9: classic trigger for a tube

Exam traps

- Do not reach for imaging, ultrasound or IV access before a threatened airway.
- Check the blood glucose before blaming the brain.
- Tension pneumothorax: decompress, do not wait for an x-ray.
- Exposure always comes with warming.

Trauma primary survey: the xABCDE order

Video, written lesson, practice question and sources: medservatory.com/usmle-step-2-ck/emergency-acute-care/trauma-primary-survey-xabcde-atls-11

For exam study only, not medical advice. Follow local guidelines and your lab's ranges.
© 2026 Medservatory, a project of ADMR Solutions Ltd.
Free to print and share for personal study.