



Occupational Exposures and Safe Work Practices

As health care demands increase in the United States because of our growing aging population, there is an increasing need for innovative health care options. Home health care, which provides medical assistance to the ill, elderly, convalescent or disabled in the comfort of their own residence, is one of the fastest growing industries in the country. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that employment in this field will grow 55% from 2006 to 2016.

Home health care workers include a variety of occupations, including:

- Nurses
- Home health care aides
- Physical therapists/ occupational therapists
- Social workers
- Hospice care workers

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Resources and References

- Occupational Hazards in Home Healthcare: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-125/pdfs/2010-125.pdf>
- OSHA Safety and Health Topics – Home Healthcare: https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/home_healthcare/index.html
- National Association of Social Workers Standards for Palliative & End of Life Care: <https://www.socialworkers.org/practice/bereavement/standards/standards0504New.pdf>
- Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3148.pdf>

Because of the physical demands of the job, these workers face risks and hazards that are unique to the home setting, including a work environment that is not under their control. Some of the most common exposures and sources of injury include:

- Musculoskeletal disorders
- Infectious diseases and bloodborne pathogens
- Slip and falls
- Aggressive behaviors and workplace violence
- Driving

Looking at 2011 OSHA data, nursing and residential care facilities experienced a reported 59,390 lost-time injuries. The typical injured individual was a 45- to 54-year-old woman who had been on the job for one to five years. She had likely been working a two- to four-hour Monday morning shift and most likely sprained or strained her back while handling patients. The second most common accident was a fall onto a floor.

Musculoskeletal Disorders

When handling patients, a home health care worker's body needs to be able to twist, bend, stretch, reach and perform other awkward postures. Several studies have found that the most frequent causes of back pain and other injuries among these workers are from performing patient transfers and bathing, dressing and feeding patients. Workers who performed these tasks the most often had the highest rate of musculoskeletal injuries. Additionally, one study determined that home health care workers who frequently performed heavy lifting, lifted with awkward postures and lifted without mechanical assistance were likely to have permanent work disability.

To eliminate or reduce the risk for such injuries, health care workers are encouraged to use transfer and mobility devices and equipment, such as gait belts, friction-reducing devices, mechanical lifts, shower chairs, etc. Patients, family members and home health care workers should consult with equipment vendors and their loss control representatives to choose devices that will reduce the worker's strain while maintaining the patient's safety and comfort.

Infectious Diseases and Bloodborne Pathogens

Needlestick and sharps injuries are a constant risk in most medical settings. Home care is no exception. The added risk in home settings is that patients or family members, who may be assisting with the care of a patient, may not appropriately dispose of sharps, putting the worker at risk. Equipment used may not be safe sharps devices. Disruptions caused by children, pets or other family members may also result in improper use and disposal of such equipment.

Contaminated items could bring health care workers into contact with blood that contains pathogens, such as the hepatitis B, hepatitis C and human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV), all of which can pose a potentially fatal risk. To prevent injuries, employers and home health care workers are encouraged to visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/bbp/>, to obtain information about the bloodborne pathogens standard and how to meet its requirements.

For more information

UH Loss Control is committed to providing home health care workers access to resources and training that can help them work safer. For more information, contact your United Heartland Loss Control representative or call 1-800-258-2667.

Cleanliness of home environments can pose a risk to infectious disease. Consideration needs to be given to where staff place supplies, sit down, etc. At times, it may be necessary to bring a stool or disposable cloth to place supplies on. Slip-over shoe booties can be worn and disposed of upon leaving. Any issues should be communicated to management, so that a plan can be developed to ensure safe work practices. An employer should provide information about the responsibility of the patient's family to provide a safe work environment.

Aggressive Behaviors and Workplace Violence

Serving patients in an environment where they're comfortable and that can facilitate healing is the essence of home health care. However, these settings do increase the chance that a worker may come into contact with individuals or patients with aggressive or violent behaviors. Home health care workers face an unprotected and unpredictable environment every time they enter a patient's home or community.

According to a survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2006, 330 nonfatal assaults on home health care workers occurred, a rate of 5.5 per 10,000 full-time workers, which was twice the rate for all workers in the U.S. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that an effective violence protection program requires that:

- Patient and family provide a safe, home environment.
- A worker should be able to assess risks in the environment.
- An employer should provide information about the responsibility of the patient's family.
- The employer should train the staff to assess risks and implement acceptable interventions.

Individuals can react with anger because of difficulty in finding help with their situations, emotional pain or discomfort, or fear and anxiety about the results of a home health care worker visit. If a worker is in a potentially threatening situation, he or she should:

- React and respond to the individual in a calm but firm manner.
- Lower the volume of their voice and speak in an even tone to help the individual calm down.
- Move slowly and give themselves an out.
- To help the individual define their anger, acknowledge it. "I understand that you are upset" or "It sounds like you're really angry about this."
- Reinforce the positive long-term benefits of their assistance, their commitment to their patient's best interests and their role as an ally.
- Encourage the individual to sit down.
- Rehearse ahead of time what they'd say or do in these situations.
- If the situation appears dangerous, the worker should leave and call a supervisor.
- If the environment has been unstable in the past, employees should set up a "code word" system with their home office. For example, if a visit become dangerous, the employee can call the office and say, "I would like to speak with Dr. Blacksmith," who is a fictitious doctor. The operator would say he was unavailable and then know to call 911 and send police to their location.

If an employee is working at night or in an uncomfortable area, some home health care organizations allow employees to call a security agency for an escort.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Providing care for patients at their home presents unique slip, trip and fall (STF) hazards that cannot be controlled in the same manner as they would be within a hospital or long-term care facility. At a patient's home, the environmental conditions can present home health care employees exposure to slick surfaces from snow, ice or rain as well as stairways and entrances. Within the home, there may be additional STF hazards from household items, toys, furniture and wet floors in the restroom or kitchen areas. Loose area rugs and other floor coverings can also be hazardous for workers and for patients.

The rate of lost-work days from injuries caused by floors, walkways or ground surfaces for home healthcare workers in 2007 was 39.9 per 10,000 workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. To avoid these types of injuries, workers should be trained about fall protection and actions they can take to identify and reduce fall hazards for themselves and their patients. General recommendations include:

- Wear sturdy, flat shoes with good slip protection.
- Walk slowly and conscientiously on icy or wet surfaces.
- Examine the patient's walking path to the bathrooms, eating areas and sitting areas:
 - Remove or securely tape down rugs using double-sided tape if the patient gives permission to do so.
 - Secure cords and any other loose materials in the walking path that could cause the patient or a worker to slip, trip or stumble.
- Use handrails.
- Turn on outside lights before returning to your car in the dark.
- Clean up spills as soon as they happen.

