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Safe Patient-Handling Programs Benefit Everyone



Ceiling lifts can be used not only for bed- or chair-related transfers but, with appropriate slings, also for gait, balance, and mobility training.

The Facts

According to the 2006 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) report, nurse aides, orderlies, and attendants had a rate of 526 injuries requiring time away from work per 10,000 workers. This is in striking comparison to the next 3 highest rates per 10,000 workers: construction laborers (488); laborers and freight, stock, and material movers (466); and heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers (411).

In 2005, the BLS reported nurses ranked eighth among occupations reporting work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) involving days away from work, with a median of seven missed days per injury. Nurse aides, orderlies, and attendants ranked second. These injuries are not a new phenomenon; nursing personnel have been in the top 10 for WMSDs for nearly a decade—and the bulk of these injuries are incurred during patient-handling tasks.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health lifting equation has been used to calculate a recommended weight limit of 35 pounds for a limited range of patient-handling tasks under ideal conditions where the patient is cooperative and unlikely to move suddenly during the task. Very few patient transfers fall within these guidelines.

The Healthcare Provider

WMSDs are a problem encountered by health care providers every day. Workers in industrial settings use manual-handling equipment to move and manipulate heavy objects; however, patient care providers are asked to manually move patients weighing in excess of 100 pounds many times every working day. Patient care personnel face the difficult task of manually moving patients who may be in pain, are unconscious or combative; may move suddenly or erratically; and may provide varying levels of assistance depending on medication and levels of fatigue. Patients do not have handles and using what is commonly described as a proper lifting technique is not possible. ***There is truly no safe way to manually lift a patient.*** A comprehensive, successful, safe patient-handling program can decrease staff injuries and discomfort and improve retention, recruitment, and staff work satisfaction.

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The Patient

Handling patients safely is not only beneficial to the caregiver but also to the patient. Patient dignity and comfort are preserved through the use of equipment rather than the traditional “on the count of three” forceful lift and slide transfer. Using patient-handling equipment may reduce the number of skin shears that patients experience because their skin is not sliding against material but is being safely and gently lifted and lowered. Patient-handling equipment also may reduce patient falls. If a patient is secured in a sling when they experience a sudden loss of balance or fatigue, they will not fall to the floor or onto a care provider—potentially injuring themselves and the care provider. In addition, many ceiling and stand-assist lift slings are now designed to assist with gait training through the use of walking slings and scales that can be used to determine the level of weight bearing. This allows a patient to slowly gain confidence without the fear of falling, and allows a care provider to quantify advancements in levels of weight bearing and dependency.

The Facility

The healthcare facility benefits from safe patient handling include the direct and indirect costs of decreased injury rates, decreased lost time, and improved morale among staff. The current aging population and nursing shortage require facilities to consider the benefits of recruitment and retention of the best and brightest staff available. Improved patient satisfaction and outcomes are imperative to maintain the highest standard of care possible. ***A national movement has begun to make safe patient handling a priority in all medical facilities.*** Eight states have now passed legislation ensuring patient-handling programs are developed. In addition, the American Nurses Association (ANA), in collaboration with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), has developed a Handle with Care Program and has been involved in efforts to introduce safe patient handling into the nursing education literature and guidelines.

Useful Links

- U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM) Ergonomics Program
<http://usachppm.apgea.army.mil/ergogpm/>
- ANA Handle with Care Initiative
<http://nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/OccupationalandEnvironmental/occupationalhealth/handlewithcare.aspx>
- VHA Safe Patient Handling
<http://www.visn8.med.va.gov/patientsafetycenter/safePtHandling/default.asp>
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration Hospital Ergonomics
<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/hospital/hazards/ergo/ergo.html>
- BLS
www.bls.gov/

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