

Key Safety Issues in Senior Care: Choking, Heat Stroke, and Security

Susan Lucot, MSN, RN, MLT (ASCP), CPHRM

PEACE OF MIND

EXPERTISE

CHOICE

THE MEDPRO GROUP DIFFERENCE

Senior care facilities of all types face numerous patient safety and risk management issues in the day-to-day care of residents. This article focuses on three key safety issues: choking, heat stroke, and security issues in assisted living communities.

Choking Episodes in Senior Care

Issue

Recent claim events involving senior care residents are pointing to the frequent occurrence of choking. As the resident ages and/or declines in physiological function, swallowing impairment is often identified. Below are some interventions to mitigate choking episodes from occurring.

Mitigation Strategies

- Conduct frequent and thorough assessments of the resident, including physical, cognitive, and speech pathology.
 - **Rationale:** Conducting frequent and thorough assessments will enable staff to identify potential issues that can impair a resident's ability to eat safely. Assessments are imperative for putting the proper interventions in place.
- Implement diet and meal modifications to provide needed nutritional content while providing palatable and easier-to-swallow options.
 - **Rationale:** Consuming a regular diet without mechanical modifications as needed can result in choking events. Special attention should be given to food textures, such as peanut butter, that can be difficult to break down before swallowing, especially if they are consumed in large quantities. In addition, the size of each bite should be considered. For example, hot dogs and Brussels sprouts should be

cut into smaller pieces so as not to get stuck in the resident's esophagus or potentially the trachea.

- Supervise and assist with feeding for residents who demonstrate cognitive deficits and impulsive behaviors.
 - **Rationale:** As an example, serving a resident with dementia a meal consisting of small portions of foods, such as peanut butter or hot dogs, may be part of the meal plan; but if a resident is not properly supervised, the resident may consume multiple small portions at one time that could result in a serious outcome.
- Provide staff training in identifying and responding to choking situations. This education is critical. All staff members working and assisting with feeding and supervising residents should be certified in basic life support (BLS) so that they can quickly assess a choking event and provide the appropriate intervention, such as back blows and/or the Heimlich maneuver, to remove the obstruction.
 - **Rationale:** Because the obstruction typically blocks respiration, the resident can quickly develop cardiopulmonary arrest. If this happens, a BLS-certified caregiver can swiftly shift to performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation. With having less than 5 minutes to respond to these situations before the resident suffers permanent injury or death, it would be in the best interest of each senior living facility — regardless of care level — to adopt these measures and improve resident outcomes.

Resident-Accessible Outdoor Areas and Heat Stroke

Issue

Sadly, many residents become victims of heat stroke and death from sitting outside on hot, sunny days. Although residents have the ability to ambulate and traverse outdoors, particularly in assisted living and long-term care facilities, it's prudent to implement steps to prevent injury.

Mitigation Strategies

- Educate staff, residents, and family members about heat stroke and how quickly it can occur for an elderly and/or physically impaired resident.

- Implement a buddy system among residents to escort each other inside and outside of the building.
- Conduct periodic staff checks (i.e., 30 minutes) of the resident-accessible outdoor areas.
- Ensure a staff member is stationed at all times near the doorway(s) leading to the outdoor areas when it's accessible to residents.

Security in Independent Living Communities

Issue

One of the biggest concerns in an independent living community involves the security of residents. Much like apartment communities, a perpetrator has access to many potential victims by having an easy way to enter the premises.

In a recent case, a perpetrator was able to enter each resident's apartment by pretending to be a maintenance worker. In the Dallas area, he killed and robbed 18 elderly victims, mostly women in their homes. For many of the earlier victims, the deaths were presumed to result from sudden health exacerbations, such as heart attack, stroke, or natural causes. As a result, many of these were never fully investigated, and no autopsies were conducted. This enabled the perpetrator to continue on his killing spree.

Learning from this situation, there are some safety measures that can be executed to mitigate the chances of this happening in your communities.

Mitigation Strategies

- Educate residents about safety within and around their homes and apartments.
- Implement a system to notify residents of any maintenance to be done both in and around the home. If possible, publicly post photos of the maintenance worker(s) that will be onsite to do the repairs or renovations. Be sure to include the dates and times of the work to be done.
- Always have a staff member (known to the residents) escort any maintenance workers or vendors while on the property/campus.
- Form a resident safety committee to conduct routine watch parties.

- Work with local law enforcement in identifying, notifying, protecting, and escaping unsafe situations.

Click below for more details about the case discussed in this section, see the article [‘Evil roaming’: Texas trial set for man charged in 18 deaths.](#)

This document does not constitute legal or medical advice and should not be construed as rules or establishing a standard of care. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney or other professional advisors if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

MedPro Group is the marketing name used to refer to the insurance operations of The Medical Protective Company, Princeton Insurance Company, PLICO, Inc. and MedPro RRG Risk Retention Group. All insurance products are underwritten and administered by these and other Berkshire Hathaway affiliates, including National Fire & Marine Insurance Company. Product availability is based upon business and/or regulatory approval and may differ among companies.

© 2021 MedPro Group Inc. All rights reserved.