Providing Safe, High-Quality Care for Obese Patients
Patient Safety & Risk Solutions

Obesity is a serious and costly problem in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than one-third of the adult population and close to one-fifth of the youth population suffer from obesity.\(^1\)

The prevalence in obesity has increased significantly over the past several decades, resulting in changes in patient demographics that might require healthcare providers and their staffs to assess the clinical and customer service processes they use to ensure patient safety and satisfaction.

Healthcare providers are seeing patients whose weights may complicate their diagnostic and treatment protocols. These patients may require additional time during their appointments. Further, compliance with treatment plans might be more difficult for obese patients, and accurate diagnoses might be more challenging, more time-consuming, and more expensive to accomplish.

Comorbidities pose additional challenges, and successful outcomes for obese patients might be more difficult to achieve. Additionally, obese individuals might be less likely to seek medical attention due to embarrassment, fear, or stigma; therefore, they may not receive timely diagnoses, treatment, or the best possible outcomes.\(^2\)

**Challenges in Clinical Care**

Obesity can pose multiple challenges in clinical care. For example, an obese patient undergoing an endoscopic procedure may require more staff assistance and attention in preparation for the procedure. Anesthesia may present additional challenges. Finding a vein,
monitoring blood pressure, and determining appropriate dosages of various drugs might vary considerably when a patient is significantly overweight. Also, recovery time potentially could be extended and require more oversight.

Other clinical challenges might include monitoring of respiration and the need to move obese patients more frequently to prevent nerve damage. In addition, obese patients may inadvertently pose physical risks to medical staff. Even if it is possible to move a patient without hurting him/her, the number of staff members required for the transfer could cause complications. Finally, staff members’ attempts to help move or to break the falls of obese patients may result in workers’ compensation claims.

**Review of Patient Safety**

As healthcare teams assess their safety protocols with a focus on the risk factors associated with caring for obese patients, they will likely identify additional processes and training that should be in place to decrease the potential for patient or staff injuries. Some of these assessments might consider the timing of referrals and the additional information that may need to be shared with specialists who will participate in patients’ diagnoses or treatments.

Documentation is especially important, because treating an obese patient may require input from several medical specialties. For example, a gastroenterologist may need to consult with the patient’s cardiologist or orthopaedic provider to formulate a treatment plan. Procedures that typically utilize the services of a nurse anesthetist might require the oversight of an anesthesiologist. The input of several specialists may provide a comfort level for the practitioner undertaking a procedure with this type of high-risk patient.

A review of the “everyday” aspects of the healthcare practice may reveal some additional opportunities for safety improvements. For example, waiting room furniture should be large enough to accommodate obese patients. Exam room tables, gurneys, surgical tables, etc., may pose risks if they are neither wide enough nor sturdy enough. Bathroom facilities should be checked for the possibility that stall doors might be too narrow. Also, wall-mounted toilets can pose both safety and plumbing risks, because obese individuals might cause a wall-mounted appliance to break away from its attachments.
Other factors to consider in the care of obese patients include ensuring that equipment and materials are adequate in size. Blood pressure cuffs that are too small will not give accurate readings. Needles that are too short will not pierce all the way through adipose tissue, and the patient may sustain an injury if medication is trapped in fatty tissue. Scales that cannot accurately report a patient’s weight might prevent staff from determining the proper doses of medications, relegating clinical decisions to “best guess” status.

Once the healthcare team members begin to think about these risk factors, they will likely be able to readily identify processes that can help improve patient safety and satisfaction.

**Emotional Factors**

In addition to the physical challenges of caring for obese patients, emotional challenges also can occur. Healthcare providers and their staff members might be frustrated by the amount of time and physical energy invested in patients for whom compliance and standard treatment protocols are more complicated and time-consuming.

Because clinicians are unlikely to be reimbursed for the additional time needed to complete an appointment or procedure for an obese patient, customer satisfaction surveys may accurately reflect patients’ impressions that they have been hurried along or treated disrespectfully.

Issues of explicit and implicit bias also present challenges in the care of obese patients. A recent study noted that, “Many healthcare providers hold strong negative attitudes and stereotypes about people with obesity. There is considerable evidence that such attitudes influence person-perceptions, judgment, interpersonal behaviour and decision-making. These attitudes may impact the care they provide.”³

For both providers and staff, feelings of frustration and issues related to bias and stigma should be discussed and addressed. As a team, they should work to identify appropriate processes and solutions so that the organization can commit to acceptable standards of patient safety and satisfaction.
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Additionally, acknowledging that some patients will require more time, more assistance, more reinforcement, and more emotional support is important. Healthcare teams will want to meet these challenges in ways that protect patients but also take into account professional satisfaction.

**Resources**

Healthcare providers can choose among a wealth of resources that will help them assess their current protocols and improve patient safety and service for the high-risk obese population. Online resources, professional associations, specialty societies, and local health systems are among the best places to start.

As a general guide, a review of protocols should include:

- A review of the diagnostic, treatment, and office processes that might require modifications or updates to protect patients and staff
- The protocol for including additional healthcare practitioners/specialists, if necessary, to formulate adequate treatment plans for obese patients
- Assessment of the physical office and the equipment and supplies that are used
- Documentation of the steps taken to protect the physical and emotional health of obese patients
- Training to ensure that the healthcare team is able to maintain respectful and competent standards when interacting with a group of patients that may prove challenging

**Conclusion**

Obesity is a serious and ongoing health concern in the United States. The condition may complicate patients’ diagnoses, treatments, and ability to comply with treatment plans. Assessing office protocols and environmental factors to ensure adequate and safe care and treatment for obese patients can help healthcare providers and staff improve patient safety and satisfaction.
Endnotes


3 Ibid.