MedPro Group
a Berkshire Hathaway company

Risk Tips

PATIENT SAFETY & RISK SOLUTIONS

Ergonomics and Safe Patient Handling

Providing a safe environment for healthcare employees is an essential responsibility for facility management. However, healthcare employees are exposed to risk factors in facilities, such as lifting heavy items, bending, reaching overhead, pushing and pulling heavy loads, working in awkward body postures, and performing the same or similar tasks repetitively.[1] In turn, exposure to these risk factors for musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) increases their potential for injury.

Ergonomics, the study of people's efficiency in their working environment, helps lessen muscle fatigue, increases productivity, and reduces the number and severity of work-related MSDs.[2] Additionally, safe patient handling programs can be instituted to alleviate possible symptoms resulting from handling patients.

Following are 15 risk tips associated with assessing a facility's environment, including assessing data related to worker injury, creating clear objectives for ergonomics, devising a written safe patient handling policy, and involving healthcare employees in the process.

1. Define clear goals and objectives for the ergonomic process, solicit input from healthcare employees, assign responsibilities to designated staff members, and clearly communicate the process to all healthcare employees.

2. Create an environment in which healthcare employees can identify and provide important information about hazards in their facilities, including processes for assessing environments, instituting corrective actions, and evaluating the progress of implemented actions.

3

Ensure that healthcare employees are aware of ergonomics and its benefits, become informed about ergonomic-related concerns in the workplace, and understand the importance of reporting symptoms of MSDs early.

4

Encourage healthcare employees to voice their concerns and suggestions for reducing exposure to risk factors and hazards to help prevent or reduce the development of symptoms of MSDs and serious injuries. Implement solutions to control identified risk factors and hazards.

5

Devise a written safe patient handling policy or program that incorporates specific measures to prevent injury. Ensure that all healthcare employees are aware of this policy or program and its requirements.

6

Explore how the facility's patient handling procedures might affect patient care. Manual lifting, repositioning, or transfer can increase patients' risk of falls, fractures, bruises, and skin tears (pressure injuries). Using safe patient handling with mechanical equipment may reduce risk.

7

Ensure that the facility's safe patient handling policy or program minimizes the use of manual lifting, repositioning, or transfers (e.g., through a "minimal lift" policy).

8

Instruct healthcare employees on the basic physics in safe patient handling, such as (a) moving something takes less effort when it's close to the body than when it's relatively far, and (b) pushing objects is easier than pulling them.

9

Provide healthcare employees with easy access to equipment (e.g., slide sheets and portable or ceiling-mounted lifts) to assist with patient handling tasks. Include special accommodations for bariatric patients in the facility's safe patient handling policy or program.

10

Review the facility's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)-recordable injury log, check workers' compensation records, and consult with human resources to quantify employee MSDs from patient handling events and the associated costs.

11

Identify the occupations (e.g., registered nurses, nursing assistants, etc.) or root causes of activities with the highest risk of injury in your facility to more effectively target interventions.

12

Identify the units (e.g., departments, floors, wards) that have the highest rates of worker injuries associated with handling patients in your facility to more effectively target interventions.

13

Identify which activities (e.g., lifting, repositioning in bed, lateral transfers, etc.) account for the highest number or severity of injuries in your facility to more effectively target interventions.

14

Direct healthcare workers to gather patient handling and mobility equipment accessories and check battery status before shifts begin.

15

Integrate patient handling considerations in the design (e.g., installing or providing storage for patient handling equipment) when planning any renovation and/or new construction projects.

For additional information, see MedPro Group's *Risk Resources: Ergonomics and Safe Patient Handling*.

Endnotes

[1] Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (n. d.). Ergonomics. Retrieved from www.osha.gov/ergonomics

[2] Ibid.