

# Preventing Workplace Injuries

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## FACTS

“There’s no place like home,” “Home is where the heart is,” and “Home sweet home” are phrases we all recognize. None of those phrases would indicate that home is also a place where many workplace injuries occur, and home health aides are particularly at risk.

In fact, workplace injuries among home health aides are much more frequent than injuries for nursing assistants in hospitals. The work is not so very different, and both nursing assistants and home health aides are exposed to some of the same hazards such as exposure to infectious diseases, or needlestick injuries, or back strains from lifting patients. Why, then, is the incidence of workplace injuries so much higher for the home health aide? The simple answer is that homes will never be controlled environments as hospitals are. It is not likely that you would ever encounter a threatening dog in a hospital room, and there aren’t any clutter, sagging floors, and broken steps to deal with. The hospital nursing assistant does not have to drive through pouring rain or climb over snow banks to move from one patient to another. Many of the things that make home health so different from other industries are the very things that can increase the risks of injury among staff.

It is important for you as a home health aide to know some of the most common causes of workplace injuries, and how to prevent them. Every single day and with every single patient, you need to be cautious and try to protect yourself from injury.

## BACK STRAIN

Back strain is by far the most common injury among home health aides. This is not surprising since home health aides do a lot of lifting, positioning, and transferring of patients. In addition, the workspace in the home is not always well suited for good body positioning. Patients are often in regular beds and chairs and aides must bend to reach them. In addition, the bed may be against a wall, the room may be small and cluttered, the bathroom may not be large enough, and patients may be very much overweight.

There are many measures you can take to prevent back strain injuries. These include:

1. Keep yourself healthy.

Maintain good nutrition, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. Use good posture all the time and work to control the stress in your life.

2. Use good body mechanics.

Apply all the principles every time you are working with a patient.

- a. Keep yourself balanced: keep your feet apart, kneel or squat when necessary, and wear low-heeled shoes.
- b. Use larger muscle groups to do most of the work: bend at the knees and use the strong muscles of the legs.
- c. Stand close to an object when lifting and hold the object close to you.
- d. Tighten your stomach muscles when you are lifting or transferring to keep strain off the back.

# Preventing Workplace Injuries

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- e. Adjust the level of the work area whenever you can. If you cannot, then lower your body by bending your knees instead of stooping over.
3. Know your patient and his or her limitations.
  - a. Read the care plan at the beginning of the visit for directions on activity, mobility, transferring, or positioning needs.
  - b. Determine the level of cooperation and assistance you will get from the patient when lifting or transferring. Never try to transfer a patient who is refusing to be transferred.
4. Check out any equipment before you use it to make certain it is working properly and that you feel comfortable in using it.
5. Be organized and have everything at hand so that you do not reach at an awkward angle to get something you need.
6. Mentally prepare for what actions you will take should the patient begin to fall during a transfer.
7. Watch the patient carefully during transfers for any signs of dizziness or signs that he or she may lose balance.
8. Do not lift a patient from the floor if he or she should fall.

## HIGHWAY ACCIDENTS

It may be surprising for you to learn that after over-exertion injuries (back strains, etc.), the next most common work-related injuries to home health aides are those related to highway accidents. Because you must travel from patient to patient, you likely spend a great deal of time walking to and from your car or bus, or riding in your car or bus. Some tips to help prevent these injuries include:

1. Keep your car in good running condition with good tires, and keep your gas tank filled.
2. Use caution when opening car doors on busy streets.
3. Drive defensively and be alert at all times. Check directions before beginning to drive, not while you are on the road. Do not eat while driving and use the cell phone only for emergencies.
4. If you must walk on the side of a road without sidewalks, always walk on the left, facing oncoming traffic. If you will be walking at dawn or dusk, wear reflective clothing and carry a flashlight.
5. If you travel by bus, know where the bus stops are and where the routes will take you. Use care in getting onto and off the bus. Always sit if possible, and make certain to hold onto rails or straps if you cannot sit.

## FALLS OUTSIDE THE HOME

Home health aides make visits to all kinds of neighborhoods and in all types of weather. In some areas you may have to walk between ice- or snow-covered driveways. Not every homeowner may have cleared his section of a sidewalk where you must travel. Snowplows may have made giant mounds of snow that block access from the street onto the

# Preventing Workplace Injuries

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sidewalk except at intersections. Patients may not have cleared or salted icy steps leading into the house. You may have to walk a short distance in driving wind and rain, trying to keep yourself and your supplies dry. All of these situations can increase the risk that you might fall and injure yourself. Measures to prevent injury from these types of falls must be geared to caution and common sense. Allow enough time so that you will not be rushed, and always be alert for obstacles in your path.

## INJURIES DUE TO YOUR OWN BODY REACTIONS

Injuries due to bodily reactions include injuries caused by over-reaching, twisting, tripping, or actions taken to regain balance. These injuries can occur when something is dropped and the aide tries to catch it. Other times include trying to keep a patient or object from falling. Anticipating things that can possibly happen could prevent many of these injuries.

## FALLS INSIDE THE HOME

In order to prevent unnecessary falls, home health aides should always be aware of the environment, and take measures to reduce their risk of falling. When visiting a patient for the first time, look around for loose flooring, slippery throw rugs, clutter, pets, and other obstacles that might trip you. Be especially careful in climbing and going down stairs.

## INJURIES DUE TO EXPOSURE TO BLOODBORNE PATHOGENS

As a home health aide, you encounter body secretions on a regular basis. It is of utmost importance that you use appropriate barriers to protect yourself from direct contact. Always carry your personal protective equipment with you, and follow your agency policies on protecting yourself.

## INJURIES DUE TO VIOLENCE

Violent incidents can occur in any home. Home health aides should be very wary of patients or families who seem hostile, are intoxicated, or appear to be using illegal drugs. On the first few visits to a home, you should look around to note if there are any openly displayed firearms or other weapons. Leave the home immediately if you feel that you are in danger. Then call the supervisor as soon as possible.

## KEY POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- » While the homecare environment cannot be controlled, you can control yourself. Your own actions can do more to protect yourself from injury than anything else.
- » Learn your agency's policy for reporting an injury. If you sustain an injury while traveling to a patient's home, outside the patient's home, or inside the home, report the injury to your supervisor as soon as possible.
- » Mentally plan all transfers and lifts, and have plans already in mind if there are complications.
- » Never transfer a patient in a manner that you do not think is safe for you or the patient. Notify the supervisor if you are assigned a transfer process that you consider to be unsafe.
- » Keep your body healthy and well-rested.

# Preventing Workplace Injuries

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## CASE STUDY: SAFETY FIRST?

Roger has been a home health aide for over a year. He is tall and overweight so he appears very large. He believes that, because of his size, he is strong enough to lift anyone. He doesn't think he needs to pay attention to body mechanics since he is so large and also because he is only twenty. He thinks bending at the knees or squatting is for "sissies."

Roger says he is never afraid of anyone, so he pretty much ignores family disputes in his patients' homes even if there are weapons openly displayed. "Live and let live — that's my motto," he often says.

Roger often laughs about his car. It's quite old and he says he doesn't have enough money to get it fixed up. His car has been stalled on the freeway three times in the past year. The tires are bald, but Roger says he doesn't make enough money to buy new ones. "After all, I'm a home health aide, not the administrator," he laughs.

"I never was much of a reader," Roger says, explaining that he doesn't always check the assignment sheet. "Besides, a patient knows better than a nurse how he should be transferred. I'll listen to him over a nurse every time. After all, I'm working for him and it's his house."

On a recent supervisory visit, a nurse took Roger aside and asked him why he wasn't wearing gloves when he was performing oral care. "Do you see these hands?" Roger asked. "Now where do you think you're going to find gloves to fit them?" When the nurse asked if he had requested gloves Roger replied, "No. I don't really use that stuff anyhow. None of my patients have AIDS or anything. It's just one more thing to carry around and never use."

## THINK ABOUT IT

- » What do you think about Roger? Do you think he is doing enough to protect himself from injury?
- » What workplace injuries do you think he may be more subject to because of his own actions?
- » How many areas for improvement do you see in Roger's actions and attitude?
- » Think about your last three visits. Can you recall some actions that might have placed you at risk of injury?

# Preventing Workplace Injuries

DIRECTIONS: READ EACH QUESTION CAREFULLY. THEN, DETERMINE THE BEST ANSWER. CHECK THE CORRESPONDING BOX ON YOUR ANSWER SHEET. DO NOT WRITE ON THIS POST-TEST.

1. Which of the following is true about workplace injuries sustained by home health aides?
  - a. They are the same as those of nursing assistants in hospitals.
  - b. There is nothing that can be done to prevent them.
  - c. Controlling the home environment would eliminate them.
  - d. The most common ones are back strains.
  
2. Which of the following would be considered a workplace injury?
  - a. A broken arm suffered when you fell in the shower getting ready for work
  - b. A knee injury suffered while you were walking up the patient's driveway
  - c. A cold you got during the winter
  - d. A black eye you got from running into a door on Sunday because you were thinking about having to go back to work on Monday
  
3. Which of the following can help prevent injury when lifting?
  - a. Hold objects at arm's length when lifting them.
  - b. Keep your feet together at all times when lifting.
  - c. Bend at the knees and hips when lifting.
  - d. Relax the stomach muscles when lifting.
  
4. Which of the following is true?
  - a. When walking on the side of the road without sidewalks, you should walk on the left, facing oncoming traffic.
  - b. When walking on the side of the road without sidewalks, you should walk on the right, in the same direction as the traffic.
  
5. Which are precautions to help prevent injuring yourself when you are transferring a patient?
  - a. Read the care plan for directions.
  - b. Keep yourself balanced.
  - c. Watch the patient carefully during the transfer.
  - d. All of the above
  
6. Which of the following is not true?
  - a. If a patient falls to the floor, lift him or her from the floor immediately.
  - b. Mentally prepare for what actions to take if a patient should fall.
  - c. If you are not sure how to use certain equipment, don't use it.
  - d. Adjust the level of the work area whenever possible.

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# Preventing Workplace Injuries

POSTTEST, PAGE 2

7. Your own actions can do more to protect yourself from workplace injury than any other single thing.
  - a. True
  - b. False
  
8. Which of the following should be reported to the supervisor?
  - a. The patient was transferred without any problem.
  - b. The equipment in the home is functioning well.
  - c. You used good body mechanics for a transfer.
  - d. You do not feel it is safe to transfer the patient according to the assignment sheet.
  
9. Which of the following can contribute to workplace injuries?
  - a. Failure to use good body mechanics
  - b. Failure to use protective equipment
  - c. Failure to follow the assignment sheet
  - d. All of the above
  
10. Workplace injuries are much higher for nursing assistants in hospitals than for home health aides because they care for so many patients every day.
  - a. True
  - b. False

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