

LEGAL UPDATES

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OSHA Issues Brochure on Safe Patient Handling in Nursing Homes

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently published a new brochure titled “Safe Patient Handling: Preventing Musculoskeletal Disorders in Nursing Homes.” In the brochure, OSHA recommends strategies to reduce musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in nursing homes. OSHA recognizes that nurses and other healthcare workers experience some of the highest rates of non-fatal occupational injuries and illnesses of any industry sector.

According to OSHA, in 2010 there were 40,030 occupational MSD cases in private industry nationwide where the source of injury or illness was a healthcare patient or resident of a healthcare facility. In MSD cases involving patient handling, 99 percent were the result of overexertion, resulting in sprain, strain or tear injuries. Nursing aides, orderlies and attendants incurred occupational injuries or illnesses in 49 percent of the MSD cases involving healthcare patients. Registered nurses accounted for 17 percent, and home health aides another 6 percent of the injuries.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2012 nursing and residential care worker injuries were significantly higher than those in construction (143 versus 227 per 10,000 full-time workers), and two to three times higher than in retail or manufacturing. Almost half of the injuries and illnesses reported for nurses and support staff were MSDs, and these injuries were almost four times higher than the average for all workers.

As part of the Safe Patient Handling Campaign launched by OSHA in 2013, OSHA began distributing information about how to prevent hazards such as lifting excessive weight during patient transfers and handling. OSHA also informed employers how they can initiate a zero-lift program, by which workers can minimize direct patient lifting by using special lifting equipment and transfer tools.

In the brochure, OSHA outlines the elements of a successful safe patient handling program. The elements are:

1. Commitment from management at all levels;
2. Organization of a safe patient handling committee;
3. Assessment of high-risk units, areas, and patient handling tasks;
4. Implementation of technology and design methods to control hazards;
5. Education and training of staff; and
6. Regular program evaluations.

What This Means to You

The brochure emphasizes that a key element of a successful and safe patient handling program is sufficient education and training so that each worker understands the elements of the safe patient handling program and how to participate. OSHA recommends the education and training of healthcare workers should be geared toward the assessment of hazards, selection and use of the appropriate patient lifting equipment and devices, and review of evidence-based practices for safe patient handling. Training should also include when and how to report injuries.

The brochure can be downloaded at
<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/healthcarefacilities/safepatienthandling.html>.