

CARE FOR U PLUS

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Employee Safety

Home health workers face an array of safety risks – including overexertion, falls, car accidents and hostile pets -- that make their jobs more treacherous than those of their hospital counterparts. In fact, the injury rate in home care settings is about 50 percent higher than that in hospitals, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports.

Safety Tips for Home Health Care Workers

Use Common Sense

Working in home health care can be incredibly rewarding due to the one-on-one relationships home care workers develop with patients. Unfortunately, being removed from a controlled environment like a hospital does come with risks. Many home health care workers work alone, without the support of a partner or a nursing staff. For that reason, exercising common sense is one of the most important safety tips for home health care workers. To stay safe in any patient environment, home health care workers should take the following precautions:

- If you're visiting a home for the first time, make sure you have clear directions, so you aren't wandering around an unfamiliar neighborhood.
- Protect your belongings by locking car doors and hiding any bags or valuables.
- Keep your cell phone within reach at all times in case of an emergency.
- Make sure your agency has emergency contact numbers on hand for you.
- Confirm that your agency knows your location at all times.

Listen to Your Body

Physical injury is always a risk in any strenuous healthcare occupation. Additionally, home health care workers often spend time in unfamiliar environments, which can lead to accidents like falls. Back injuries are also common, as home health care workers are often responsible for moving or lifting patients. If you're in a home without a partner or buddy, make sure to listen to your body. When moving or lifting a patient, make sure to bend your knees deeply, exercise good posture, and watch your step. If you have a regular patient who is difficult to move or lift, consider asking your agency for a buddy to help you stay comfortable and safe.

Be Cautious with Pets

Home health care workers spend a lot of time in patients' homes. That's one of the joys of the job, as it allows workers to get to know patients and their family members -- furry family members included. While some pets are friendly and open to new faces, others can be volatile. Make sure not to touch pets without first consulting your patient. Remember, you're a newcomer in the pet's territory.

Be Aware of Abusive Situations

Although rare, home health care workers can be especially vulnerable to violent or abusive situations since they often work alone. If you're a home health care worker in a situation that makes you uneasy, always go with your gut. If you find yourself in a volatile situation with a patient or a visitor, stay calm.

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Regulate your tone of voice and your movements until you can reach a safe space. Once you removed yourself from the situation, call your supervisor to let them know. If necessary, don't hesitate to contact police. If you're unsure how to identify threatening behavior, check out the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for a variety of resources. Remember, your safety always comes first.

How to Prevent Exposure in Unsafe Conditions:

Home healthcare workers may encounter unsanitary homes, temperature extremes, homes without water that is safe to drink, or hostile pets.

EMPLOYERS SHOULD

Establish criteria for acceptable home environments, including hygiene, temperature, access to water, and pets. Train employees on the concept of acceptable home environments and what they should do if a home they visit is unsanitary.

EMPLOYEES SHOULD

Follow their employers' guidelines for reporting of unacceptable home environments.

UNSANITARY CONDITIONS

Hygiene may be an issue of concern for home healthcare workers in some client locations. Unsanitary homes may harbor pests such as rodents, lice, bedbugs, or mites. These unsanitary conditions can cause contamination of medical supplies and equipment, as well as spread disease and infection. If a home is unsanitary:

- Consider using clean pads with plastic on one side to place under equipment and supplies.
- Take in only the necessary equipment and supplies so pests infest fewer things.
- Avoid setting objects such as purses and bags on a carpeted floor or upholstered furniture.
- Consider wearing disposable coveralls.
- Use non-latex disposable gloves and hand sanitizer.

HOME TEMPERATURE EXTREMES

Some clients' homes may be very hot or very cold. If this is the case, take the following steps:

- If you are concerned about the home being too cold and you cannot change the thermostat, ask your employer to contact social service agencies to help the client. Local resources may be available to help pay heating bills.
- If a home is uncomfortably warm, ask for permission from the client to open the windows and use fans. If necessary, apply cool compresses to your neck. Drink plenty of water. If you believe the client is at risk from the heat, ask your employer to contact social service agencies to help the client.

LACK OF WATER

Home healthcare workers may encounter a home with no running water or water that is of poor quality. Homes may use bottled water for drinking and have access to cisterns for flushing and bathing.

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- If conditions present a health hazard, ask your employer to contact social service agencies to help the client.
- Use hand sanitizer.

HOSTILE ANIMALS

In some situations, home healthcare workers may be threatened, bitten, or otherwise injured by unrestrained animals. When facing a threat from an animal:

- Wait outside until the pet is restrained.
- If you see fleas or other pests, discuss appropriate control measures with the client and contact your supervisor.
- If the client isn't receptive to pest control measures, ask your employer to contact social services to help the client and make it possible to work there.