



A Risk Management Module:

PREVENTING EMPLOYEE FALLS IN THE HEALTHCARE WORKPLACE



Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time

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A Risk Management Module: Preventing Employee Falls in the Healthcare Workplace

THE DAY IT ALL WENT WRONG

Monica had been working as a CNA in home health for nearly 30 years. She was just two years away from retiring. Monica spent her entire career protecting her clients from falls. In fact, her “claim to fame” around the agency was that she never had a client fall while she was on duty in all of her decades on the job.

And it seemed that all of the safety measures Monica took to protect her clients actually protected her too! Monica never had a fall of her own while on the job either—until the day it all went wrong!

Monica was running **late for work**. She **hadn’t gotten much sleep** the night before and she was **rushing**. Since she was **getting older**, her speed and **coordination** didn’t seem to want to keep up with her desire to get to work on time. And the **extra weight** she had put on over the years made keeping her balance feel like a tightrope walk over the Grand Canyon.

When Monica arrived at her client’s home, she hastily slid out of the car, grabbed her bag and dashed for the front door. But the light rain that had fallen over night, combined with unusually cold temperatures had made the steps icy. Monica’s foot slid out from under her. She tried to grab the rail to keep from falling, but she missed. She put her hand down to brace the backward fall, but ended up landing hard at the bottom of the steps. She bruised her tailbone and broke her wrist.

The injuries Monica received from the fall were serious enough to put her out of work for a few weeks. When she returned to work, her back pain kept her from enjoying her job the way she used to. Monica was forced to retire early when the pain became unbearable. She was embarrassed and angry that her long career and perfect safety record had both come to an end.

Simply by working in the healthcare field, your risk for falls on the job is much greater than in any other career. Keep reading to learn more about how to prevent your own workplace falls—whether you work in a hospital, a long term care facility or in client homes.



THE BIG PICTURE ON FALLS

Work-related falls, like Monica's, often lead to serious injuries that can interfere with your ability to do your job. You may experience:

- Lost workdays (and wages).
- Pain (sometimes long term or chronic).
- The need for surgery or other medical procedures.
- An inability to continue working.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, injuries from falls in the healthcare workplace are 90% greater than the average rate for all other private industries combined.

The most common injuries from workplace falls affect the knees, ankles and feet as a result of sprains, strains, dislocations and tears. But, fractures and multiple injuries, like the broken wrist and bruised back that Monica suffered, are also common.

PREVENTION IS THE KEY!

You take measures every day to prevent your clients from falling. Now it's time to take some of those same measures—and a few more—to protect YOURSELF!

This inservice focuses on preventing the most common hazards that lead to workplace falls in healthcare, including spills, trip hazards (clutter, cords, medical tubing), weather conditions (ice and snow), inadequate lighting, and problems with stairs and stair rails.

But that's not all! There are things you can do PERSONALLY to prevent falls on the job. For example, did you know that being overweight, not getting enough sleep or being physically out of shape can all increase your risk for falling? It's true! That's why making a few lifestyle changes can help you prevent falls too!

Just remember, accidents will happen. That's why they call them "accidents!" So, while this inservice is focused on PREVENTION, it will also help you to know what to do if you are injured from an accidental fall while you are on the job.



The Facts

- *In 2010, there were 152,000 workplace injuries and illnesses in the manufacturing sector, compared to a whopping **653,000** in health care.*
- *Healthcare has twice as many workers as construction, but there are far fewer safety inspections in healthcare.*
- *In any given year, there are about 52,000 construction site inspections compared to just 2,500 in healthcare facilities. It's no wonder there are so many injuries!*
- *30% of reported workplace falls result in the worker being absent from the workplace for over one month.*
- *The average cost from slips and falls across all industries is \$22,800 per incident.*

WHAT'S NEW?

Grab your favorite highlighter! As you read this inservice, **highlight five things** you learn that you didn't know before. Share this new information with your co-workers!



CAUTION

SLIP RESISTANT
SHOES
MUST BE WORN
PAST THIS POINT



WHAT EXCITES YOU?

YOU CAN RUN YOUR OWN SLIP RESISTANCE TEST

Are your shoes really slip resistant? Plenty of shoe makers claim their shoes will protect you from slips, but there are currently no standards for labeling slip resistant shoes in the US—so they can say whatever they want.

Here's how to find out if a shoe is really slip resistant (so you don't have to find out "the hard way!"):

- Look at the tread design. **Circles designs** are better than other shapes.
- Feel the sole. Is it soft or stiff? **The softer the sole, the better the grip.**
- Finally, pour some soapy water on a slippery surface and then **drag the shoe over the surface** to see if the shoe grips or slips.

THE MOST COMMON HAZARDS

SPILLS

Spills are common in healthcare. You may encounter:

- Water (or other liquid) spilled by a client, co-worker or visitor.
- Soap that drips on the floor by a hand washing station.
- A freshly washed floor.
- Bodily fluids (urine or stool) that has leaked, splashed or otherwise spilled from a client, a bedpan, a urinal or a around a commode.

In facilities, spills are most common near the food service areas, water fountains and bathrooms. In home health, spills can be found in the kitchen, bathroom or anywhere near the client!

⇒ **Here's an example:** John works in a skilled care facility. Most of his residents need help getting to the bathroom. One day, one of John's residents gets up to use the bathroom on his own. On his way, Mr. Watson has "a little accident" and urine leaks down his leg onto the floor. He uses the call light in the bathroom to ask for help getting back to bed. As John approaches the bathroom to help, he slips in the urine and finds himself sprawled on the floor in the mess!

TRIP HAZARDS

Clutter, cords, tubing, throw rugs and floor mats all seem to reach out and grab the unsuspecting feet that pass by. And, more often than not, those feet will be yours!

In home health, the most common trip hazards are clutter, electrical cords that cross walkways and loose throw rugs.

In facilities, you may come across tubing from IVs, chest tubes or oxygen. Clutter is usually minimal, but still possible! Floor mats at the building's entrances and exits can get loose or turned up and become trip hazards.



⇒ **Here's how it can happen:** Rosie works in home health. Her client, Mr. Albright, is generally neat, but lately, he has been unable to tidy up around the house like he used to. One day, Rosie enters the home for work, but just three steps in, her foot catches on a bag of garbage that was left near the front door. She falls forward into the kitchen and breaks her front tooth on a wooden kitchen chair.

MORE COMMON HAZARDS

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Ice and snow are the usual suspects in weather-related falls, like the one Monica had in the beginning of this inservice. You may encounter these fall hazards at entrances, in parking garages and lots, on walkways, and on outside stairs. While these types of falls can happen in any healthcare setting, you're more likely to encounter problems in home health situations where clients and family members are unable to shovel or clear walkways or keep ice from building up prior to your arrival.

INADEQUATE LIGHTING

Inadequate lighting impairs your vision and your ability to see hazards. Poor lighting conditions may occur in hallways, stairwells, and in areas outside of your facility or workplace.

Additionally, caregivers who work the nightshift are at a greater risk for falls when they check on sleeping clients (without turning on lights) or when they ambulate clients to the bathroom in darkened rooms and hallways.

⇒ **One caregiver's story:** Thomas was a CNA who provided home care services for hospice clients. He was sensitive to the needs of his clients and their family members. One morning Thomas arrived while his client was still sleeping. Not wanting to disturb the man's sleep, Thomas tiptoed quietly into the room where all the lights were off and the curtains were drawn closed. Thomas did a quick check of his client's breathing and turned to leave. But, as he turned, his foot slipped on the pages of a magazine that was on the floor, sending Thomas stumbling awkwardly into the corner of the man's night stand.



STAIRS

Stairs that are poorly marked or uneven, handrails that are not the right size or height (or are poorly maintained) can easily lead to a trip and a fall.

⇒ **A true story:** A nurse in a senior living community fractured her ankle while walking down a flight of stairs to retrieve supplies from the basement. She testified in court that the steps were "steep" and that the handrail didn't extend the full flight of stairs.



GET OUT!

THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX!

Your job often requires coming up with creative solutions to uncommon problems.

THE PROBLEM: You provide home care to Mr. Parsons. It's been a harsh and snowy winter. Normally, Mr. P's son keeps the outside walkway and stairs shoveled and swept. But he hasn't been able to get out of his own house.

The roads are clear and you are able to get to the house, but now you have to find a way to get through a foot of snow to get safely into the house.

GET CREATIVE: Think of 3 creative solutions you might try to get yourself safely into the house.

Be sure to read the suggestions on page 8 of this inservice for tips on staying safe in the snow and ice.

TALK ABOUT IT: Share your ideas with your co-workers and supervisor and find out how they would solve the problem.

A “PERFECT STORM” OF PERSONAL FALL RISK FACTORS

According to the National Weather Service, a “perfect storm” happens when a high pressure system and a low pressure system collide to create a “once-in-a-lifetime” storm. In the business world, a “perfect storm” is a disastrous situation created by a powerful combination of factors.

In the healthcare workplace, two powerful factors that are brewing up a “perfect storm” are the aging workforce and obesity. Each of these factors alone are a cause for concern. But when both of these factors combine in the workplace, the outcome can be devastating.

AGE RELATED CHANGES THAT ADD TO YOUR RISK FOR FALLS

As workers age, inevitable changes will occur that increase the potential for falls. Normal age-related changes in older workers include:

- **Strength**—As the human body ages, it loses muscle mass and strength.
- **Flexibility**—Normal age-related loss of flexibility has been associated with loss of strength, loss of balance, restricted movement, slower reaction times and less accurate movements.
- **Balance**—Having good balance means being able to control and maintain your body’s position, whether you are moving or remaining still. As people age, they may have difficulty with their balance.
- **Reaction time and speed**—With age, physical responses and reaction times may slow down.

BEING OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE INCREASES YOUR RISK FOR FALLS

Several recent studies have shown that there is a growing population of overweight and obese workers employed in the healthcare sector.

And, research proves that obese individuals are more likely to fall or stumble while walking. But why? Here’s how obesity increase your risk for falling:

- **Balance and control**—Excess body weight impairs balance and postural control. This means people who are obese may have trouble staying balanced and steady.
- **Joint pain and swelling**—Extra weight places excess strain on joints which often leads to inflammation and pain. This alone increase the risk for falling. But in response to the pain and swelling, many individuals move less to avoid the pain. This leads to loss of muscle tone, strength and flexibility.

THE PROBLEM WITH FATIGUE

Most health care organizations provide care around the clock. And, according to the Joint Commission, several trends, like nursing shortages and sicker patients, have forced many healthcare providers to increase the 8-hour shift to 10 or 12 hours with rotating patterns of days, evenings, and nights.

Research shows that extended work hours, night shifts, short/no breaks and heavy workloads all increase a worker’s risk for falls on the job because they lead to fatigue and exhaustion. Fatigue causes:

- Slowed reaction time,
- Decreased attention to detail, and
- Poor problem solving.

Rules and regulations to combat worker fatigue have been developed in other industries. For example, the National Transportation and Safety Board limits time on duty for airline pilots and requires them to have opportunities for sleep.

However, ***in health care, there are no universal measures in place to protect workers from the effects of fatigue.***



KEEPING CLIENTS SAFE FROM FALLS WILL KEEP YOU SAFE TOO!

Working with clients who are at risk for falls places YOU at risk for falls too! Think about it: if you are transferring or ambulating a client who becomes unsteady or begins to fall, chances are you're going to do your best to "catch" your client or to try to stop the fall. And this is when you might find *yourself* falling too.

So how do you keep your clients safe from falls? Here are a few tips:

- When you begin caring for a new client, ask your supervisor about the fall risk level. Find out if that client has any disease or condition that might cause falls. Also, ask if the client has a history of falling. The more you know, the better prepared you will be to keep your clients safe.
- Help educate clients about the risk factors for falls. By learning more, they may feel more in control and more confident about avoiding falls.
- If a patient becomes weak or dizzy during ambulation and begins to fall, it is important to protect both yourself and her from injury. Instead of trying to hold the patient up or catch her, help ease her gently to the floor. You can do this safely by placing your arms underneath the patient's axillae and then placing one leg forward and allowing her to use it for support as you ease her to the floor.
- Assist your clients to the bathroom as needed. Check with clients often for the need to use the bathroom. This avoids a "last minute" rush that may lead to a fall.
- Keep your clients' environment as free from clutter as possible.
- If necessary, help your clients move from a sitting to a standing position or when getting in and out of bed. When you help move a high risk client from the bed to a chair, for example, be especially careful about supporting the person throughout the transfer.
- Report any change in a client's blood pressure to your supervisor. If your client's blood pressure drops when he stands up, he could become unbalanced and fall.
- For clients with a history of dizziness, encourage them to sit on the side of their bed for a few minutes before attempting to stand.
- Encourage your clients to wear shoes that are suitable for walking, instead of loose slippers or sandals. Shoes with low-heels and light, non-skid soles are the best. Also, make sure that any laces are tied tightly. Loose shoes and untied laces can both cause your client and YOU to fall.



Something NEW!

TAI CHI (pronounced TIE-chee) is a gentle, slow-motion form of ancient Chinese exercise that has recently been proven to **reduce falls** in the elderly by nearly 50 percent!

Tai Chi promotes:

- Stronger knee and ankle muscles,
- Improved mobility and flexibility,
- Better balance.

Tai Chi is a safe alternative for older adults who cannot otherwise exercise. It is very low impact, does not require any special equipment, and can be done indoors or out.

- *Does your facility offer a Tai Chi class for residents? If so, observe a class one day. Encourage your clients with high risk for falls to join.*
- *If you work with clients in the home, look for a Tai Chi DVD or search your local senior center or YMCA for classes.*



CONNECT IT!

MONICA'S STORY

Remember Monica from the beginning of this inservice? What are at least **four** factors that placed Monica at risk for a fall?

Monica can't do anything about her advancing age or the weather. Those risk factors are out of her control. But what could she have done to reduce her risk for falling that day?

Share your thoughts with your co-workers and supervisor. Find out what they think!

SMART WAYS TO PREVENT FALLS

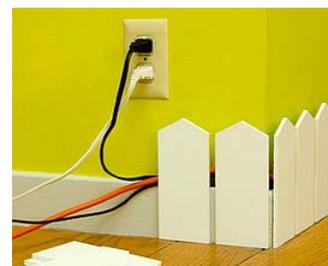
PREVENTING FALLS FROM SPILLS

It goes without saying that you should clean up any **known spills** right away. However, it's those **unknown spills** you really have to worry about! So how do you keep yourself safe from those? **Here are a few tips:**

- **Assume there will be spills around sinks, near bathrooms, and anywhere near where food is prepared or served.** If you assume the spills are there, you will be on the lookout for them! Then, when a spill is spotted, you can clean it up before you fall and get hurt!
- **Always wear rubber soled shoes, but be careful with Crocs!** If your workplace has not banned Crocs yet, they might! While the rubber soled shoes are skid resistant, they are almost too good at their job. Stories of healthcare workers being injured in falls related to Crocs are common! It seems the Crocs tend to grip *too well* to certain floor surfaces, causing the person to stop in their tracks and sometimes even fall forward.
- **Close off areas that have just been mopped or waxed.** In facilities, your housekeeping team will post WARNING signs when the floor is wet. In home health, it's your job to warn yourself! Close the door to freshly mopped kitchens and bathrooms. If there is no door, place a chair in the doorway to remind yourself not to enter.

PREVENTING FALLS FROM TRIP HAZARDS

- **Eliminate clutter so that walkways are clear.** Be sure to tidy up the area around your client at the end of each shift. If you find they tend to toss things on the floor, create a command central in their seating area by giving them a basket or bin to keep things close that they use the most.
- **Use cord organizers to bundle cords that are hanging close together.** You can buy expensive organizers at Staples or other office supply stores, or you can get creative and do-it-yourself with rubber bands, bread ties or anything else that is available!
- **Loosely coils oxygen tubing.** Oxygen tubing is usually long to give the person plenty of room to move around. Keep this tubing loosely coiled beside the person when they are sitting. Don't wrap it around or hang it on anything. This could cause the person to fall if they get up and walk away without detaching it first. You'll have to recoil it every time they get up to move.



MORE WAYS TO PREVENT FALLS

PREVENTING WEATHER-RELATED FALLS

If you live in an area that gets snow and ice, take these precautions:

- Wear proper foot gear with good traction.
- Take smaller steps when walking or shuffle your feet.
- Bend slightly, walk flat-footed with your center of gravity over your feet.
- Walk slowly. Never run on icy ground. You may have to leave a few minutes earlier to avoid being late and rushing.
- Keep both hands free for balance. If you must carry stuff, use a back pack.
- Use handrails if available.
- Test potentially icy spots by tapping the area with your foot.
- If you fall, avoid using your arms to stop your fall (to guard against broken bones).
- If the walkway is covered with ice, travel along grassy areas for traction.
- When entering buildings, remove snow and water from shoes to prevent slipping.

PREVENTING FALLS FROM INADEQUATE LIGHTING

- Place **nightlights** in bedrooms, hallways, bathrooms and anywhere else you provide client care when it's dark.
- **Carry a small flashlight** in your pocket for checking on clients in the dark.

PREVENTING FALLS ON STAIRS

- **Take your time on stairs.** Rushing is a common reason that healthcare workers fall on stairs.
- **Make sure stair are well lit.** In facilities, report right away if a staircase you use needs more lighting. In client homes, replace bulbs or install nightlights as needed.
- If stairs are uneven or steep, **a brightly colored strip of tape or painting the front edge of each stair tread** can make it more visible.
- **Keep your hands free** and use the handrail on steps.



TALK ABOUT IT!

WHO KEEPS YOU SAFE AT WORK?

There are three main players involved in making sure you are safe at work:

- **OSHA** (Occupational Safety and Health Admin.)
- Your **employer**, and
- **YOU!**

In 1970, the Occupational Safety & Health Act was passed by Congress. This federal law requires a safe workplace for every American employee.

Businesses that fail to comply with OSHA regulations face fines of \$5,000 per day or more.

- Ask your supervisor what OSHA requires to keep you and your co-workers safe at your workplace.
- Discuss anything at your workplace that makes you feel unsafe, such as steep stairs, dark parking lots, frequent spills, etc.
- Help come up with a solution to keep everyone safe at work!



FIVE KEY POINTS!

REVIEW WHAT YOU LEARNED!

1. Whether you work in a facility or in client homes, simply by working in the healthcare field, your risk for falls on the job is much greater than in any other career.
2. The most common injuries from workplace falls affect the knees, ankles and feet as a result of sprains, strains, dislocations and tears.
3. The most common hazards that lead to workplace falls in healthcare include spills, trip hazards, weather conditions, inadequate lighting, and problems with stairs and stair rails.
4. Another hazard is the “perfect storm” of an aging workforce and obesity.
5. You take measures every day to protect your clients. Now it’s time to take some of those same measures—and a few more—to protect YOURSELF!

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF!

Earlier in this lesson you learned that there are a few things about you, personally, that can increase your risk for falls. What can you do about those things to keep yourself safe? Here are a few suggestions:

Stay strong. Everyone loses muscle mass and strength with increasing age. But you can stay strong by getting regular exercise! Using light weights (or even soup cans) to exercise your arms and do weight bearing exercises like waking will keep your back and lower body strong.

Get loose. Staying flexible and limber will help you with balance and coordination. Yoga is an excellent way to stay both strong and flexible. But if you’re not into yoga, just doing regular stretches every day can help.

- ⇒ Touch your knees, then your toes. Hold for 5 seconds, then stand up. Repeat this 10 times every day.
- ⇒ Reach for the sky. Raise your arms above your head like you’re trying to grab a star from the sky! Hold for 5 seconds, then release. Repeat this 10 times every day.

Eat well. Eating a healthy diet keeps your mind and body strong! Light meals and healthy snacks throughout the day will keep you alert and energized!

Lose weight. Being overweight or obese is a huge risk factor for falls. If you are battling with your weight, get help. Your family doctor can make some suggestions. Or, if you’re motivated, organizations like Weight Watchers have a proven track record for helping millions of people lose weight successfully. Talk to your co-workers about starting a walking club and a weight loss group together. Surrounding yourself with supportive people will increase your chances of success!

Get plenty of rest. You work long, hard hours. Your job is physically and mentally demanding. And chances are, your day doesn’t end when you leave work. Maybe you have children or other family members to take care of. Or maybe you play a sport after work or like to stay out late with your friends. Whatever your situation is, you’re going to be tired. And if you don’t take time to rest, that “tired” feeling will turn into FATIGUE.

- ⇒ Getting the right amount of sleep takes practice and needs to be a habit. For example, if you have to be to work at 7am, you should get into the habit of going to bed by 10pm. That way you can get a full 8 hours of sleep and awake refreshed at 6am.

