

Patient handling: Assessing the risks

Patient handling is the top cause of injury among health care workers. Care workers who manually transfer or reposition patients are at significant risk of musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) such as sprains or strains.

Before a patient is transferred or repositioned, the employer must ensure that a risk assessment is performed to determine the safest method for both the patient and the worker. In addition, workers should perform a point-of-care risk assessment (PCRA) before each handling activity. This information sheet provides an overview of these two types of risk assessment.

Employer responsibilities

To reduce the risk of injury to workers who are transferring or repositioning patients, employers must do the following:

- Identify tasks or activities that put workers at risk of MSI.
- Assess the risk to workers.
- Implement MSI control measures (e.g., lifts, other devices, work practice modifications) to eliminate or minimize the risk to workers.
- Educate workers to identify the following:
 - Risks related to their work.
 - Early signs and symptoms of MSI and potential health effects.
- Train workers in the MSI control measures that have been implemented.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the control measures on a regular basis.
- Consult with the joint health and safety committee or worker health and safety representative with respect to all of the above.

Risk assessments

A risk assessment is a thorough examination of the aspects of a task that could cause injury to workers. A risk assessment helps to determine whether the degree of risk is low, moderate, or high. The results of the risk assessment should be documented and can be used to determine the patient handling method that is safest for both the patient and the worker.

Risk assessments must be done by individuals who have the following:

- A good understanding of the physical demands of the task and the factors that influence those demands
- Knowledge of the work processes
- Knowledge of equipment uses and limitations
- Education and training in risk assessment methods

Most patient handling activities present one or more MSI risk factors, so each activity will



require a risk assessment. Examples of high-risk patient handling activities include the following:

- Transferring
- Repositioning
- Toileting
- Bathing

Factors that must be considered for each activity include the following:

- The physical demands of the task (e.g., force required, duration, work postures)
- The environment (e.g., working heights, working reaches, floor surfaces, room size, furniture, workspace)
- The patient (e.g., physical characteristics, mobility, predictability, cognition, aggression)
- The organization of the work (e.g., type of task, task variety, task scheduling)

As part of the risk assessment process, consult with a representative sample of workers (i.e., workers of different ages, heights, genders, shift schedules, and work locations).

Assessing the risk of MSI from patient handling is a continuous process, as a patient's condition can change suddenly.

Point-of-care risk assessments

In addition to the employer's risk assessment and control efforts, workers play a role in assessing risks. Workers should carry out a PCRA each time they are about to provide care to a patient. A PCRA is an informal process in which a worker briefly assesses the situation to determine if it's safe to proceed with a task or activity.

Workers should assess four elements in a PCRA: the patient, the task, the environment, and the worker. The following sections include key questions to ask for each element of a PCRA.

The patient

- What is the patient's physical and cognitive status?
- Is the patient capable of following directions?
- Does the patient have adequate lower body strength (e.g., the ability to bridge)?
- Does the patient have adequate upper body strength (e.g., the ability to support the body and head)?

The task

- Do I have the tools I need to complete the task?
- Is appropriate equipment, such as a lift, available?
- Have there been any changes to the care plan?
- Do I have to complete this task right now?

The environment

- Is the area safe? (Is there enough room? Is the area clear of tripping hazards?)
- Do I have a safe exit?
- Can I easily get help from someone if I need it?

The worker

- Have I been trained in how to care for this patient?
- Have I been trained in how to use the equipment?
- Am I mentally present and focused on the task?

If your answers to any of these questions indicate that the situation is unsafe, do not proceed. Discuss with your supervisor, re-evaluate the plan, and start again when it's safe to proceed.

OHS Regulation requirements

The [Ergonomics \(MSI\) Requirements](#) (sections 4.46 to 4.53) and their related guidelines aim to eliminate or minimize the risk of MSI to workers. The regulation and guidelines are available on [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com).

For more information

For more information, visit the [Patient handling](#) page on [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com).