

# A Guide to Safe Patient Handling

BY CYNTHIA DECKER, MS, RN

**P**ATIENT HANDLING POSES MANY concerns and challenges in the healthcare setting, and virtually every healthcare facility has a program designed to keep healthcare workers safe from injuries related to moving patients. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2001, 68.6 percent of healthcare workers' strains and sprains were a direct result of patient-handling tasks. That percentage translates into millions of dollars of workers' compensation costs, lost work days and thousands of painful, sometimes career-ending injuries.

## Top Causes of Injury

According to federal statistics, the top causes of injuries related to patient movement include the following:

- lateral transfers;
- repositioning;
- assist to standing from sitting; and
- bed to chair transfers

## Tips for a Safe Move

**Involve the patient whenever possible.** Even a small amount of effort on the patient's part will help ease the burden on your own back and shoulders.

**Ask for help.** Assistance from another staff member can make all the difference when repositioning or moving a patient. If you have to wait a few minutes for assistance, be patient. Preventing yourself from an injury is well worth the wait.

**Coordinate your efforts.** Explaining your plan of action will reduce the risk of injury. For example, "Mrs. Jones has little arm strength. We'll be helping her off the right side of the bed onto this chair. I'll be on her left and you'll be on her right. We'll go on three." A little direction can go a long way.

**Invest in proper assistive equipment.** Get to know the different types of patient populations on each unit so you will understand what type of device is needed. You may find a chair lift is the right choice



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for a wound care center, but a horizontal repositioning device might be better for the med/surg unit. The availability of assistive devices ranges from low- to high-tech solutions.

**Understand the task.** When using any assistive device equipment, the important thing to remember is different equipment will be needed depending on the type of move. A lateral move from a stretcher to a bed requires a device much different than one to move a patient from a chair to a bed.

**Keep assistive and friction-reducing devices accessible.** If equipment is stored in a closet, it won't be used. When possible, store the devices in the patient's room so staff members aren't hesitant to retrieve it for use.

**Minimize the need to move or transfer a patient.** Can procedures be done on the same stretcher or bed the patient is assigned to? Whenever you can avoid transferring a patient, you will greatly decrease the chances of injuring yourself.

Remember, saving yourself from injury needs to be a priority. Caring for yourself means you can continue to care for your patients. ■

*Cynthia Decker is a nursing educator at MidState Medical Center, Meriden, CT. In October 2006, the facility began its "Move All Patients Safely" program, decreasing the number of injuries due to patient moves by 70 percent to date.*



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