



Hazards in Health Care Workplaces

Most of us go to work in health care believing that it must be a healthy and safe place to work. Surprisingly, working in health care settings — whether in a hospital, nursing home, home for seniors, group home, or in the community providing care in clients' homes — can be as hazardous as working in other environments.

What are your rights?

Fundamental to creating a strong culture of occupational health and safety, all workers including residents have the following rights,

- To be made aware of the hazards in their work environment, how to recognize those hazards, and how to protect themselves from identified hazards
- To ask questions about their health and safety, bring concerns or issues to your supervisor, without risk of discrimination, and to participate in matters that effect their health and safety
- To refuse work that the worker has grounds to believe poses an unusual danger

What are the Hazards in Health Care Workplaces?

Biological Hazards

Working in health care and community care, residents may be exposed to a large number of biological hazards. Staff, patients, residents and clients may be carrying germs of which they are unaware. If proper controls are not in place, workers may unknowingly be exposed to viruses such as hepatitis B, bacteria, and other biological agents. Biological hazards can pose a significant risk to health care and community care workers if not properly controlled.

Control Measures

- Ensure you receive training on biosafety and exposure control measures
- Get immunized where prescribed and as required
- Use safety engineered equipment as appropriate (e.g. biosafety cabinet)
- Adhere to infection prevention, control practices and standard precautions
- Where appropriate personal protective equipment
- Know protocols to be followed in the event you are exposed to a pathogen or are injured (e.g. needle poke, laceration, inhalation of pathogen)
- Dispose of biohazardous waste in accordance with host institution procedures
- Report unsafe conditions, concerns and issues to your supervisor

Standard Precautions – are the minimum infection prevention practices that apply to all patient care, regardless of suspected or confirmed infection status of the patient, in any setting where healthcare is delivered. These practices are designed to both protect health care practitioners and prevent health care practitioners from spreading infections among patients. Standard Precautions include: 1) hand hygiene, 2) use of personal protective equipment (e.g., gloves, gowns, masks), 3) safe injection practices, 4) safe handling of

potentially contaminated equipment or surfaces in the patient environment, and 5) respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette.

Chemical Hazards

Health care environments can house a vast array of chemicals. Examples of hazardous chemicals may include pharmaceuticals, cytotoxic drugs, gases, disinfectants and antiseptics; many chemicals used in laboratories; detergents and cleaners.

Control Measures

- Ensure you receive training on the chemicals being used and how to use them safely
- Properly label and store chemicals
- For controlled products, know where and become familiar with associated Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS)
- Use safety engineered equipment as appropriate (e.g. fume hoods)
- Adhere to work procedures and rules when working with chemicals
- Wear appropriate personal protective equipment
- Know where safety equipment (emergency eyewashes and showers, fire extinguishers) are located
- Know emergency response protocols to be followed in the event of an incident, spill or release of a chemical
- Dispose of chemical waste in accordance with host institution procedures
- Report unsafe conditions, concerns and issues to your supervisor

Physical Hazards

Common physical hazards in health care environments can be wide ranging including heat, noise, vibration, electricity, and contact with or struck by an object. Other physical agents such as lasers, X-rays, or other forms of radiation used on patients can be harmful to workers if not properly controlled.

Control Measures

- Be aware of your work environment and physical hazards that are present
- Ensure you receive training on processes, procedures and on equipment and tools that you will be using
- Keep work areas organized and tidy
- Adhere to defined work procedures and rules.
- Wear appropriate personal protective equipment
- Know where safety equipment (emergency eyewashes and showers, fire extinguishers) are located
- Know emergency response protocols to be followed in the event of an incident
- Report unsafe conditions, concerns and issues to your supervisor

Ergonomic Hazards

Ergonomics is the science of fitting the work environment to the people who do the work. It looks at the interaction between humans and other aspects of the work environment, and strives to match the abilities and characteristics of people with the tasks they perform.

Ergonomic hazards can contribute to the development of musculoskeletal disorders (MSD's), which can develop as a result of overuse of body tissues through awkward, repetitive and/or forceful movements. One of

the goals of ergonomics is to design tasks to achieve optimum performance of a task while minimizing the risk of injury or discomfort.

Lifting and transferring patients, and clients can be very dangerous if the caregiver is not properly trained or if proper lifting devices are not available or improperly used. Many caregivers experience sprains and strains related to this kind of activity.

Control Measures

- Be aware of your work environment and work activities that may pose ergonomic hazards
- Ensure you receive training on patient transfer, lifting, and repositioning (TLR)
- Practice good lifting techniques when handling materials
- Be aware of your posture and body position when performing tasks
- Be aware of physical symptoms that may be early signs of musculoskeletal injuries (e.g. persistent or recurring pain, numbness or tingling, swelling, weakness, stiffness, cold hands, changes in skin colour (redness, bruising, whiteness), increase in skin temperature in area)
- Employ ergonomically designed equipment and tools
- Adhere to defined work procedures
- Wear appropriate personal protective equipment
- Take regular breaks when performing tasks that require awkward postures to be sustained for long periods
- Talk with your supervisor if you are experiencing physical symptoms and seek appropriate medical treatment
- Report unsafe conditions, concerns and issues to your supervisor

Psychological Hazards

Violence in the workplace can be a hazard to staff in health care and community care environments. Violence or aggression from patients, visitors, residents, staff and clients take the form of physical, emotional and/or mental abuse.

Most health care settings require some sort of shift work. Shift work can be very stressful to workers and their families.

Working with people who are seriously or even terminally ill day in and out can be very emotionally wearing.

Control Measures

- Ensure you receive training on psychological hazards and control measures at your host institution
- Promote a respectful work environment
- Adhere to defined work procedures
- Report incidents or concerns to your supervisor
- Know emergency response procedures in the event of a violent situation

How can you be safe?

There are ways to make your workplace healthier and safer.

- Participate in health and safety training provided by the university and the host health care institution
- Become familiar with your work environment and the hazards that exist
- Follow policies and safe work procedures of the host health care institution

- Use safety engineered equipment and devices provided to you
- Follow standard precautions for infection prevention and control
- Wear personal protective equipment provided to you
- Do not be afraid to ask questions about health and safety in your work environment
- Report health and safety issues and concerns to your supervisor
- Report incidents to your supervisor
- Be familiar with emergency response procedures for your workplace

If you have questions about health and safety, contact your supervisor, or Safety Resources at 306-966-4675.