



Slip, trip and fall prevention in the home healthcare environment



Introduction

Employee injuries from slipping, tripping and/or falling in the home healthcare setting are generally the first or second most frequent type of employee injury for the typical home healthcare operation. These incidents may be very costly and result in serious injury to the employee. Although they are preventable in some circumstances, it may be more difficult to implement normal controls because the injuries occur in clients' homes. The circumstances or conditions may change frequently and the control over hazards encountered is more difficult within clients' homes. There are some basic risk factors to consider when addressing employee slip, trip and fall exposures in the home setting. If employees are trained to recognize these factors, they may have the potential to help prevent slips, trips and falls while working.

Home healthcare is defined as long-term, short-term or hands-on healthcare, provided to a client in their home. While home healthcare workers offer medical care in the comfort of the client's own home, they may face a unique set of risk factors to their health and safety. This document aims to raise awareness to the potential exposures to slips, trips and/or falls encountered in a client's home, and to provide insight on mitigation strategies.

Discussion

What is the difference between a slip, a trip and a fall?

- A **slip** occurs when there is too little friction or traction between an individual's feet and the walking surface they are on.
- A **trip** occurs when an individual's foot strikes an object and the momentum of their own body causes the individual to be unbalanced.
- A **fall** usually takes place when an individual moves from one level to another or ends up hitting the ground on the same level.

Potential causes of slips, trips and falls in the home setting include the following:

- Surface condition, changes, quality and appearance
- Foreign materials on the floor, such as water, food or other materials
- Obstructions
- Visibility
- Stairs, step stools, ramps and ladders
- Human factors
- Unique home healthcare exposure

Potential risk factors to watch out for and steps to take into consideration are discussed and outlined below.

Surface condition, changes, quality and appearance

When a home healthcare employee enters a client's home, there is little the employee can do to change the home's surface composition. Because this is out of the employee's control, being aware of the type of surfaces present in the home and what they are composed of, can aid in awareness of reducing the likelihood of a potential injury. Surface condition and changes are other risk factors the home healthcare employee has little control over. As employees visit clients' homes, they will observe a wide variety of conditions of walking surfaces both outside and inside the home. The client's health and physical capacities can also play a major role in the condition of the home. The homes of the aged and seriously ill may be particularly vulnerable to deterioration due to a client's inability to provide repairs and routine maintenance.

Be aware of these conditions, changes, quality and appearances:

- Loose or torn carpet
- Movement from different floor textures (i.e., carpet to tile and vice versa)
- Broken or missing floor tile
- Glossy flooring due to construction or waxing
- Curling mats or rugs placed throughout the home
- Cracked or lifted concrete due to soil shifting
- Pooling water on walking surfaces due to poor roof or ground drainage
- Spilled water, food or other materials that are not cleaned up promptly
- Outside uneven surfaces, including sidewalks, yards and parking areas

Obstructions

Obstructions within the walkway can also contribute to slip, trip and fall hazards in the home. Some common obstruction in homes may include:

- Electrical or telephone cords
- Congested areas where boxes, excess furniture or toys accumulate
- Open drawers throughout the home
- Potted plants on the floor
- Animals lounging or walking/running in client care area

Visibility

Visibility can play a large role in identifying a slip, trip and fall hazard, as an employee may enter a room or area within the client's home. Having adequate light can allow for early identification of a hazard and also reduces eye strain when performing other activities needed. These are some areas within the home that may lack adequate lighting:

- Hallways
- Client bedrooms
- Storage areas
- Any rooms with shades or blinds on the windows

Stairs, step stools, ramps and ladders

Stairs and ladders can play unique roles in potential slip, trip and fall hazards. Stairs are often used to gain access into the home and/or walk through the home. Ladders and step stools, while generally not in use by home healthcare workers, may be located in areas where the home healthcare worker must travel through or work within. Wheelchair ramps are sometimes used by home healthcare workers instead of stairs.

Hazards with stairs, step stools, ramps and ladders:

- Damaged or congested stairs
- Missing or damaged handrails
- Outside weather conditions affecting surface condition on outside stairs
- Ladders improperly stored in walk areas and blocking access
- Poor condition of ladder or step stool that must be used to access items off shelves for the client
- Outside wheelchair ramps, walkways and handrails may be in poor condition or covered in snow or ice

Human factors

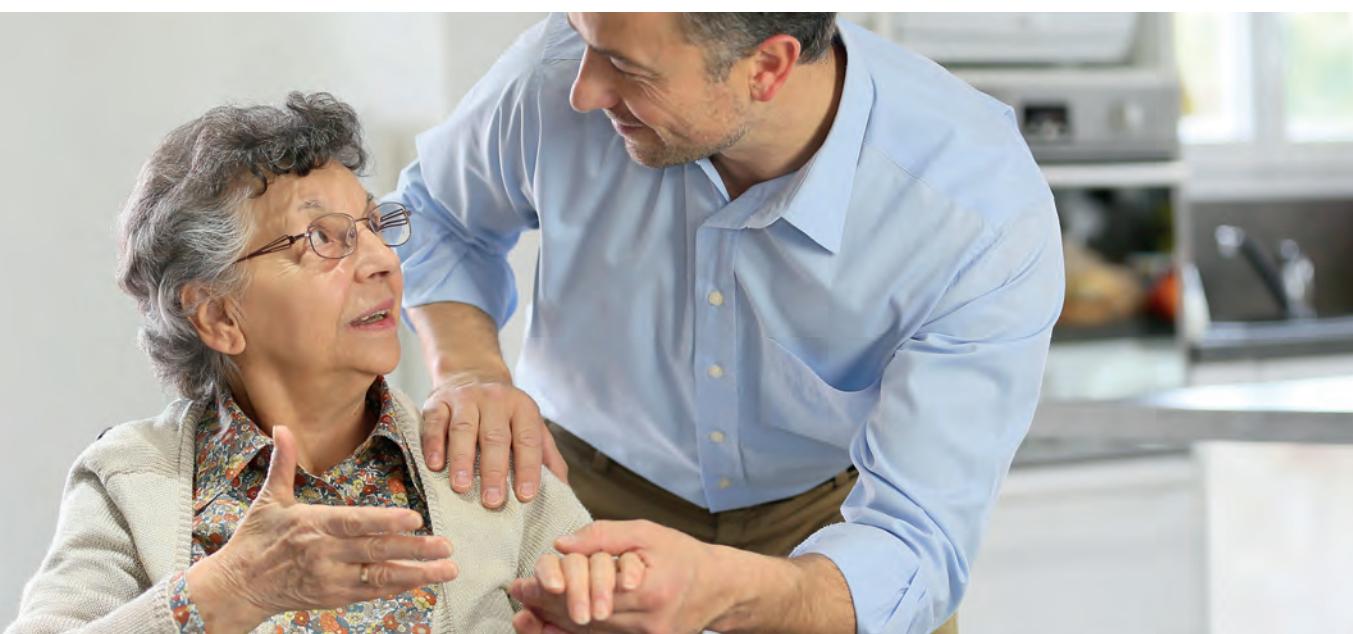
There are three categories of human factors particularly significant to home healthcare workers that may involve the potential for a slip, trip and fall hazard:

1. Client's condition: clients may be in advanced age and/or have physical impairments; when it is necessary to move them from one location to another, they may be unsteady or weak.
2. Footwear: the employee has control over his or her choice of footwear on a daily basis. Choosing footwear appropriate for working conditions is important.
3. Personal fitness: if an employee maintains a good fitness level, he/she may more safely perform the tasks needed to care for the client within the home setting.

Unique home healthcare exposures

Because healthcare is provided within the home setting, these exposures can present potential hazards to the employee when providing care and other tasks. Unique home healthcare exposures can be described as equipment and/or other material or objects found within a client's home that would normally not be found in an average home setting or that may be present only for a certain length of time. Some of these features include:

- Walkers
- Wheelchairs
- Oxygen tanks
- Commode and/or shower chairs
- Medical monitoring equipment
- Holiday decorations



Guidance

Although it may be difficult to control potential slip, trip and fall hazards in a client's home, having awareness of the potential areas where risk factors may be present can help reduce the potential of a hazard occurring and allow for correction of the hazard.

Surface condition, changes, quality and appearance

Considerations:

- Be aware of surfaces that may be slippery to walk on.
- When entering a room, look for wet spots, loose tile or missing tacking to hold carpet down.
- Report damaged walk areas, both inside and outside, to the client or family member.
- Clean up spilled liquids, food, etc., promptly.
- Straighten out mats/rugs or have them removed when not in use.
- Do not move quickly around the home.

Obstructions

Strategies for avoiding falls associated with obstructions may include:

- Ask the client or a family member to remove potential obstructions from areas where treatment is performed.
- Request animals are removed from area during treatment.
- Make sure medical equipment is placed away from the main walking area.
- Report significant housekeeping issues to the home healthcare supervisor.
- Keep drawers closed when not in use.
- Move items placed on the ground out of walking areas.
- Avoid moving heavy equipment or furniture alone.

Visibility

Visibility can be easily improved by following some of these suggestions:

- Ask the client or a family member to replace low wattage bulbs with higher wattage bulbs, and to replace burned out bulbs.
- Open draperies or curtains to allow natural light to enter room.
- Have a flashlight handy when needed.
- Suggest the client or family member add lighted switch plates or night lights throughout the home.

Stairs, step stools, ramps and ladders

Considerations:

- Avoid using ladders and step stools; if it's necessary for the job, inspect the ladder before use.
- Use handrails when moving up and down stairs and on elevated ramps.
- Avoid traveling on cluttered stairs or steps, and report the condition promptly to the client or family member.
- Avoid the use of outside ramps when in poor condition or covered in ice or snow.
- Report rotting wood, loose handrails, and broken stools to the client or a family member.

Human factors

Considerations:

Client's condition:

- Employees should know the physical limitations of the client and the fall risk.
- Employees should be instructed not to try and catch a client if they begin to fall, but to gently guide them toward the floor.

Employee footwear:

- Management should encourage employees to wear slip-resistant shoes with good sole treads and no high heels.
- Employees should be reminded to inspect shoes regularly for tread wearing and condition.

Personal fitness:

- Management should encourage employee wellness.
- Employees should receive regular health exams (i.e., physical, vision, hearing), exercise (including balance exercises) and maintain a healthy weight for overall fitness and well-being.

Unique home healthcare exposures

- Walkers, wheelchairs and canes used for client mobility assistance should be pushed away from the client care area during treatment unless the equipment is part of a therapy or mobility session.
- Oxygen tanks should be secured in sturdy racks and stored away from walk areas.
- Commode and/or shower chairs, as well as medical monitoring equipment, should be stored away from walk areas.
- Holiday decorations should not be in walk areas or in client care areas that may create a slip, trip or fall exposure.

Conclusion

Falls are preventable in the home atmosphere when the home healthcare worker, client and/or family member accepts accountability for what is in their control. They also must communicate to other parties the circumstances not within their control. Falls may occur to employees, the client, family members and/or visitors who visit the clients' home. Although this material is geared toward prevention of employee injuries, most of these practices will also help to prevent injury to others when addressed as suggested..

References

1. *Occupational Hazards in Home Healthcare. Department of Health and Human Services. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. NIOSH Hazard Review. DHHS (NIOSH) Publication Number 2010-125. January 2010. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-125/pdfs/2010-125.pdf>*

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