

# HOME CARE BRIEFING®

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## Home Healthcare Hazards: Reducing Exposure to Common Health and Safety Threats

Home healthcare hazards compromise client care and subject workers to more frequent and severe injuries, as compared to other providers who work in more controlled healthcare settings. The inability of caregivers to ensure a healthy and safe environment presents certain risk exposures in the form of physical and structural impediments, extreme temperature variances, pest infestations, lack of potable water, air pollutants, hostile animals and potentially violent situations. In an effort to promote the safety and security of home healthcare workers and their clients, this edition of *Home Care Briefing*® examines these common environmental hazards and offers strategies to help minimize their impact.

**Physical and structural impediments.** A cluttered or cramped home environment presents a challenge to caregivers and their clients, especially in relation to avoiding trip-related falls. A documented assessment of the home environment as part of the initial screening assessment can help proactively identify both physical and structural hazards. Ongoing observation during future visits can ensure that deficits are addressed and/or safely minimized.

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Common factors to look for during an environmental assessment include:

- **Proper illumination** of living areas, hallways, bathrooms and bedrooms, as well as spaces of ingress and egress.
- **Safe walkways**, including sturdy handrails, non-slip treads or mats, and evidence of ongoing maintenance, such as timely removal of debris and ice.
- **Clutter-free living spaces**, including appropriate placement of medical equipment and electrical cords.
- **Adaptive features**, such as raised seats and ramps for wheelchair-bound clients.
- **Assistive devices** in bathrooms, including anti-skid strips, shower chairs, grab bars and handheld showerheads.
- **Adjustable beds** designed to accommodate necessary changes in height.
- **Safe kitchen spaces**, including non-skid mats, organized cupboards with easy access to everyday or heavy items, and assistive devices to help secure hard-to-reach items, such as a step ladder or arm extension aide.
- **Readily available and accessible equipment** to assist with client care, including lifts, bedside commodes and walkers.

Instruct caregivers to discuss areas of potential concern with clients and remedy hazards as appropriate, such as removing throw rugs, assisting in changing light bulbs and referring clients to medical equipment vendors for assistive devices. Caregivers also should document in the client care record the actions taken to reduce hazards and notify a supervisor of any concern that cannot be remedied.

**Home temperature.** Variances in home temperature can affect the health of both clients and caregivers. Warm temperatures, in particular, may contribute to mold and bacteria growth, the spread of infection and increased pest infestations. Staff orientation should include instruction on safe temperature ranges and monitoring requirements, as well as directions on how to address the following extreme temperature variances:

- **In the event a home is too cold:** Check to ensure that the thermostat is in operating order and can be adjusted. If utility services have been temporarily shut off due to delinquent payment, alert the home care employer, in order to arrange for a social services consultation regarding available assistance.
- **In the event a home is too warm:** Request permission from clients to open their windows and turn on available fans. Drink plenty of water and encourage clients to do the same. If clients are physically overheated, apply cold compresses, when clinically indicated. If overheated rooms pose an immediate health risk to a client, call 911 and/or request the home care employer initiate a social services referral.

**Pest infestations.** The presence of rodents and insects – including lice, fleas, mites, bedbugs and scabies – increases the risk of contamination of medical equipment and supplies that are located in the home. Infested residences also contribute to the spread of disease and infection when caregivers unknowingly transport them as carriers to other clients’ homes or to their personal dwellings.

Clients should be asked before the initial care encounter if there are known insect or pest infestations in the home setting, and if so, whether treatments to control further outbreaks have been utilized in the past two to three months. Website links and/or handouts can help convey to clients the hazards associated with pest infestations, as well as appropriate ways to eradicate them.

For recommendations specific to managing bedbug infestations in home care settings, see “Bedbug Guidance for Home Healthcare Providers” to the right.

## Bedbug Guidance for Home Healthcare Providers

A dramatic resurgence in bedbug infestations has prompted home healthcare employers to train caregivers on the following protective measures intended to minimize cross-contamination:

- Wear disposable coveralls and shoe covers during a home visit. Promptly remove these items and discard them in a sealed container before entering a vehicle.
- Bring only the necessary equipment and supplies into a client’s dwelling.
- Document pest infestations in the client care record and report findings to a supervisor.
- Refrain from placing purses, bags, jackets or other objects onto a bed cover, carpeted floor or upholstered furniture.
- Use disposable latex-free gloves and liberally sanitize surface areas with wipes and sprays before placing equipment and supplies on top.
- Consider placing plastic-backed clean pads under equipment and supplies.
- Avoid sitting on a bed or upholstered furniture, opting instead to sit on a wooden or metal chair. [Many caregivers bring a portable chair to their client visits for this purpose.]
- Carry a plastic, sealable container in the vehicle in which to place personal items that may be contaminated.

See also [Bed Bug Action Plan for Home Care and Social Workers](#), issued by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and [Clinical Job Aid: Managing Bed Bug Infestations](#), issued by the Home Care Institute, 2012.

**Lack of potable water.** Clean, running water is essential to healthy living and client well-being. Caregivers should be trained on the importance of potable water and how to identify non-potable water sources in home settings, such as water that has been previously used, gathered from rain sources or left standing for an extended period of time. If concerns arise over inadequate access to clean water, instruct care providers to assess the availability of bottled drinking water, utilize hand sanitizer to ensure good hand hygiene, and relay their concern to the home care employer, who can initiate a social service intervention.

**Air pollutants.** The risk of exposure to indoor air pollutants and potentially toxic substances – such as secondhand smoke, mildew and mold – should be measured and documented during the new client assessment and intake process. Where common pollutants are found to be present, protective measures must be taken by caregivers to reduce harmful exposures during the performance of their work duties.

Adequate ventilation and the use of fans can help remove lingering cigarette smoke that may be present during a home visit. Clients should be instructed to refrain from smoking while receiving care. In the event of client noncompliance, instruct staff to promptly report the incident to a supervisor. If caregivers provide house-keeping services as part of their duties, caution should be taken to ensure that clients are not allergic to cleaning agents and substances are used according to manufacturers' directions. As with any unsanitary condition, if air quality presents a health hazard to the client or caregiver, a referral should be made to a local social services agency.

**Hostile animals.** Home healthcare workers often encounter hostile and unrestrained animals. An initial client screening should specifically inquire about animals in the home that may be prone to hostile tendencies. If threats are detected, expressly state in written service agreements that animals are to be restrained prior to home care visits.

When encountering a hostile animal during a client visit, caregivers should:

- Remain calm and wait outside the home until the animal is restrained.
- Use a soft, soothing tone of voice.
- Reiterate to the client that all animals are to be safely restrained during visits.
- Promptly advise the client of the inability to provide services if an animal cannot be restrained, and inform the home care employer so that alternate care arrangements can be made.

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#### QUICK LINKS

- [Hazard Review: Occupational Hazards in Home Healthcare](#), issued by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, January 2010.
- [Caring for Yourself While Caring for Others](#), issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, November 2014.

**Violent situations.** Because home healthcare workers are primarily dependent upon their own skills to safely defend themselves from acts of violence and aggression, staff training on the identification and management of unsafe situations is essential, both upon hire and at regular intervals thereafter. Training sessions should focus on:

- **Reinforcing the importance of remaining vigilant** to signs of impending violence exhibited by clients or family members, e.g., verbal aggression, threatening body language, signs of drug or alcohol abuse, and/or the presence of weapons. Caregivers should always maintain an open pathway for a swift exit, if required.
- **Knowing how to defuse anger**, including speaking to clients in a calm and respectful manner, avoiding directives or orders, acknowledging clients' feelings of frustration, moving in a slow manner and keeping a respectful distance.
- **Empathizing with the needs and issues of agitated individuals**, including measures to de-escalate unusual or disruptive behaviors.
- **Maintaining safe boundaries** and immediate access to a cell phone, in order to summon 911 assistance, if necessary.
- **Reporting violent occurrences and home-related hazards**, such as unsecured weapons, signs of drug/alcohol abuse or other illicit activities.
- **Trusting personal judgment** and promptly removing oneself from a potentially dangerous environment.

For additional information on violence prevention, see CNA *Home Care Briefing*® 2017– Issue 2. [“Violence Prevention in Home Healthcare: Ensuring Safe Client Care Environments.”](#)

Unaddressed household hazards present a direct risk to the well-being of clients and family members through their associated negative health effects. They also endanger the personal safety and health of caregivers, which may threaten the delivery of quality and efficient care. Home healthcare organizations can heighten staff awareness of environmental hazards and improve mitigation efforts through caregiver training that focuses on the strategies presented within this resource. Through prompt detection and remediation of hazards in the home setting, caregivers help ensure a safe working environment for themselves and the provision of quality care for clients.



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