

# Key Safety Issues in Senior Care: Choking, Heat Stroke, and Security

Susan Lucot, MSN, RN, MLT (ASCP), CPHRM

PEACE OF MIND

EXPERTISE

CHOICE

THE MEDPRO GROUP DIFFERENCE

Senior care facilities of all types face numerous patient safety and risk management issues in the day-to-day care of residents. This article focuses on three key safety issues: choking, heat stroke, and security.

## Choking Episodes

### Issue

Recent malpractice claims involving senior care residents are pointing to the frequent occurrence of choking. As residents age and/or decline in physiological function, swallowing impairment often occurs. Below are some interventions to prevent choking episodes.

### Mitigation Strategies

- Conduct frequent and thorough assessments of the resident, including physical, cognitive, and speech pathology.
  - **Rationale:** Conducting frequent and thorough assessments will enable staff to identify potential issues that can impair a resident's ability to eat safely. Assessments are imperative for putting the proper interventions in place.
- Implement diet and meal modifications to provide needed nutritional content while providing palatable and easier-to-swallow options.
  - **Rationale:** Consuming a regular diet without mechanical modifications as needed can result in choking events. Special attention should be given to food textures, such as peanut butter, that can be difficult to break down before swallowing — especially if they are consumed in large quantities. In addition, the size of each bite should be considered. For example, hot dogs and Brussels sprouts should be

cut into smaller pieces so as not to get stuck in the resident's esophagus or potentially the trachea.

- Supervise and assist with feeding for residents who demonstrate cognitive deficits and impulsive behaviors.
  - **Rationale:** As an example, serving a resident with dementia a meal consisting of small portions of foods, such as peanut butter or hot dogs, may be part of the meal plan; but if a resident is not properly supervised, the resident may consume multiple small portions at one time that could result in a serious outcome.
- Provide staff training in identifying and responding to choking situations. This education is critical. All staff members working and assisting with feeding and supervising residents should be certified in basic life support (BLS) so that they can quickly assess a choking event and provide the appropriate intervention, such as back blows and/or the Heimlich maneuver, to remove the obstruction.
  - **Rationale:** Because the obstruction typically blocks respiration, the resident can quickly develop cardiopulmonary arrest. If this happens, a BLS-certified caregiver can swiftly shift to performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation. With having less than 5 minutes to respond to these situations before the resident suffers permanent injury or death, it would be in the best interest of each senior living facility — regardless of care level — to adopt these measures and improve resident outcomes.
- Provide family and visitor education regarding resident impairments with chewing and swallowing.
  - **Rationale:** Often times, family and visitors want to provide a special treat, such as a chocolate caramel turtle, to their loved one or even other residents without understanding the potential danger that can ensue when a resident cannot properly chew and swallow food.

## Resident-Accessible Outdoor Areas and Heat Stroke

### Issue

Sadly, many residents become victims of heat stroke and death from sitting outside on hot, sunny days. Although residents have the ability to ambulate and traverse outdoors, particularly in assisted living and long-term care facilities, it's prudent to implement steps to prevent injury.

### Mitigation Strategies

- Educate staff, residents, and family members about heat stroke and how quickly it can occur for an elderly and/or physically impaired resident.
- Implement a buddy system among residents to escort each other inside and outside of the building.
- Conduct periodic staff checks (i.e., every 30 minutes) of the resident-accessible outdoor areas.
- Ensure a staff member is stationed at all times near the doorway(s) leading to the outdoor areas when it's accessible to residents.
  - **Rationale:** Although violating residents' rights and receiving citations from state surveyors is a concern for senior care leaders and staff members, they should understand that their first duty is to maintain the safety of their residents. Leaders and staff should recognize aging increases insensitivity to temperature and other external and internal stimuli. Medical malpractice liability lies with the organization providing the housing and care for residents; thus, ensuring that each resident is safe from harm — including the weather and environmental elements — is critical. Implementing periodic rounding of outdoor areas will help identify residents at risk and provide timely interventions to prevent harm.

## Security in Independent Living Communities

### Issue

One of the biggest concerns in independent living communities involves the security of residents. Much like apartment communities, a perpetrator has access to many potential victims by having an easy way to enter the premises.

In one case, for example, a perpetrator pretended he was a maintenance worker and was able to enter each resident's apartment. In the Dallas area, he killed and robbed 18 elderly victims, mostly women in their homes. For many of the earlier victims, the deaths were presumed to result from sudden health exacerbations, such as heart attack, stroke, or natural causes. As a result, many of these were never fully investigated, and no autopsies were conducted. This enabled the perpetrator to continue on his killing spree.

Learning from this situation, various safety measures can be executed to mitigate the chances of this happening in independent living communities.

## Mitigation Strategies

- Educate residents about safety within and around their homes and apartments.
- Implement a system to notify residents of any scheduled maintenance in and around the home. If possible, publicly post photos of the maintenance worker(s) that will be onsite to do the repairs or renovations. Be sure to include the dates and times of the work.
- Always have a staff member (known to the residents) escort any maintenance workers or vendors while on the property/campus.
- Form a resident safety committee to conduct routine watch parties.
- Work with local law enforcement in identifying security threats, notifying and protecting residents, and educating residents about escaping unsafe situations.
  - **Rationale:** Many seniors desire to maintain their independence by living alone, but they — as well as the landlords of independent living communities — need to recognize the reality of individuals with nefarious purposes who want to prey on vulnerable populations. People who live alone are compromised by their solitude. Having no one to periodically check on them or ensure the security of their home and surroundings leaves them as easy prey for bad actors. For independent living community operators, implementing the above mitigation strategies can help ensure the safety of residents.

For more details about the case discussed in this section, see [‘Evil roaming’: Texas trial set for man charged in 18 deaths](#).

# Security in Assisted Living Communities, Skilled Nursing Facilities, and Long-Term Care Facilities

## Issue

Perpetrators can easily access vulnerable populations through deliveries, vendor access, repair services, or even as visitors. Senior care communities and facilities generally do not vet outside service staff or visitors. Thus, implementing other risk mitigation measures is critical.

## Mitigation Strategies

- Have an employed maintenance worker or staff member escort and supervise outside service personnel at all times while inside the building.
- Alert all leaders within the building of any upcoming service repairs and deliveries as soon as known so that they can plan for adequate staffing for vendor supervision and to heighten staff awareness of anyone who does not belong inside the building.
- If a family member wants to stay with a resident due to illness or impending death, all staff and building leaders should be made aware and physically introduced to them. The visitor should have limited access to the building (e.g., the restroom, kitchen/canteen area, and the resident's room). Make arrangements to isolate the resident from any roommates to protect other residents.
- Do not provide any key codes, security fobs, or keys to anyone other than staff employed at the building.
  - **Rationale:** Most of the staff and leaders working in the senior care industry do so because they want to help those who need assistance with activities of daily living or require 24-hour nursing care. A key characteristic of these workers is to trust individuals encountered in senior care centers, whether those individuals are residents, visitors, vendors, or delivery and service staff. However, many bad actors seek to take advantage of vulnerable people for their nefarious purposes. Implementing the above mitigation strategies can help ensure the safety of residents and staff.

---

This document does not constitute legal or medical advice and should not be construed as rules or establishing a standard of care. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney or other professional advisors if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

MedPro Group is the marketing name used to refer to the insurance operations of The Medical Protective Company, Princeton Insurance Company, PLICO, Inc. and MedPro RRG Risk Retention Group. All insurance products are underwritten and administered by these and other Berkshire Hathaway affiliates, including National Fire & Marine Insurance Company. Product availability is based upon business and/or regulatory approval and may differ among companies.

© 2024 MedPro Group Inc. All rights reserved.