

Safe Patient Handling in California

Fact Sheet for Hospital Workers, June 2016



Every year, thousands of hospital workers are injured while performing patient handling tasks. Cal/OSHA requires hospitals in California to establish a plan to protect health care workers from back and musculoskeletal injuries while also protecting patients. This plan must include a safe patient handling policy to use a powered patient transfer device, lifting device, or lift team, as appropriate, instead of lifting or transferring a patient manually. The complete requirements are in the Cal/OSHA Safe Patient Handling regulation in Title 8 of the California Code of Regulations, section 5120:

<http://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5120.html>.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. In what settings does the Safe Patient Handling regulation apply?

The regulation applies to all patient care units that are part of a “general acute care hospital” (GACH) in California, except for hospitals operated by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation or the Department of Developmental Services. In addition, the regulation does not apply to subacute care units that are licensed separately as a “distinct part.”

2. What activities are considered “patient handling”?

The regulation identifies four types of patient handling:

- **To lift** is to move a patient’s body vertically or support part or all of a patient’s body.
- **To mobilize** is to put or assist in putting into motion part or all of a patient’s body.
- **To reposition** is to change a patient’s position on a bed, gurney, chair, or other support surface.
- **To transfer** is to move a patient from one surface to another, such as from a bed to a gurney.

3. Who are “designated health care workers” and “designated registered nurses”?

A **designated health care worker** is an employee responsible for and specifically trained in performing or assisting in patient handling activities and using patient handling equipment.

A **designated registered nurse**, as the coordinator of care, is responsible for (1) assessing the mobility needs of each patient to determine the appropriate patient handling procedures based on the nurse's professional judgment, (2) preparing safe patient handling instructions for the patient, (3) observing and directing patient lifts or mobilizations, and (4) communicating patient handling information to patients or their authorized representatives. A designated registered nurse may also act as a designated health care worker.

4. What is a “lift team”?

A lift team includes designated health care workers specifically trained to work together to perform patient handling activities using equipment as appropriate for the specific patient. Hospitals are required to have a sufficient number of designated health care workers available to perform patient handling tasks, but hospitals are not required to have a dedicated lift team.

5. What must hospitals include in their plans?

A hospital’s plan must be in writing and available to employees at all times. It must include (1) an effective safe patient handling policy component, (2) the names or job titles of the persons responsible for implementing the plan, and (3) procedures to ensure that supervisors and non-supervisory employees comply with the plan. When patient care units have employees who work for another employer besides the hospital (such as paramedics employed by emergency medical services and nurses and physical therapists employed by registries), the hospital’s plan must also describe how the hospital will communicate with the non-hospital employers and how their employees will be provided the required training.

Hospital plans must also include procedures for the following activities:

- **Identifying and evaluating patient handling hazards:** Procedures for selecting the equipment needed in each unit with input from designated health care workers, for assessing patients' mobility needs, and for determining appropriate patient handling procedures for each patient.
- **Investigating musculoskeletal injuries related to patient handling:** Procedures for identifying the causes of specific incidents and discussing with employees what measures (if any) could have prevented the incident.
- **Correcting patient handling hazards:** Procedures for increasing the availability of necessary equipment or staff and for designating registered nurses to observe and direct patient lifts and mobilizations in every patient care unit.
- **Communicating with employees regarding safe patient handling matters:** Procedures for relaying safe patient handling instructions for each patient and for allowing employees to communicate concerns regarding patient handling activities without fear of reprisal.
- **Evaluating the effectiveness of the plan at least annually:** Procedures for reviewing injury data and trends and for obtaining the active involvement of employees in reviewing and updating the hospital's plan regarding the procedures performed by employees in their particular work areas.

The complete requirements for hospital plans are in subsection (c) of the Safe Patient Handling regulation:

<http://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5120.html>.

6. What are the requirements for training employees?

Initial training for designated health care workers, lift team members, and designated registered nurses, as well as their respective supervisors. Initial training must cover (1) the types of injuries associated with manual patient handling activities; (2) elements of the hospital plan and how to access it; (3) the appropriate use of powered and non-powered equipment to handle patients safely (including hands-on practice using the types and models of equipment that employees will be expected to use); (4) how to communicate with patients regarding the use of patient handling procedures and equipment; (5) how to report concerns about equipment or staff availability; and (6) the right to refuse to perform a patient handling task due to concerns about patient or employee safety or the lack of trained personnel or equipment.

During the training, employees must be able to ask questions of a person knowledgeable about the plan and knowledgeable in safe patient handling equipment and procedures. In addition, **supervisors** must learn that a health care worker may not be disciplined for refusing to perform a patient handling task due to concerns about patient or employee safety or the lack of trained designated health care workers or equipment. And **designated registered nurses** must learn to assess a patient's mobility needs and prepare safe patient handling instructions for the patient.

Refresher training for designated health care workers, lift team members, designated registered nurses, and their supervisors. Refresher training must be given at least every 12 months and must cover the use of powered and non-powered equipment to handle patients safely (including hands-on practice using the types and models of equipment that employees will be expected to use). The refresher training should also review the other topics covered in the initial training. Employees must be able to ask questions of a person knowledgeable about the plan and knowledgeable in safe patient handling equipment and procedures.

Awareness training for employees who are not designated health care workers or those workers' supervisors. Other employees who work in patient care units, such as employees in housekeeping, security, and food services, must be trained to recognize the types of patient interactions that require involvement of designated health care workers or lift teams. They must also learn how to obtain that involvement and the steps to take during emergencies related to safe patient handling.

The complete requirements for training are in subsection (d) of the Safe Patient Handling regulation:

<http://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5120.html>.

7. What are the recordkeeping requirements?

Hospitals must develop and maintain records of (1) the evaluation, selection, placement, and availability of patient handling equipment or devices; (2) inspections of patient handling procedures; (3) investigations of injuries and illnesses related to patient handling; and (4) training of employees. The complete requirements for recordkeeping are in subsection (e) of the Safe Patient Handling regulation: <http://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5120.html>.