

Wheel Chair Safety

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Intro:

The wheelchair is a vital piece of equipment for someone in need and for their caregivers. For the user, the wheelchair enhances their well-being by promoting independence. One of the biggest goals for long-term care facilities is to equip residents to take pleasure in life. A wheelchair can be a tool that can be used to accomplish that goal.

While we always want to encourage residents to retain their independence, there comes a time when assistance may be needed. Sometimes this assistance is pushing a wheelchair when the resident becomes tired, in congested areas, on uneven terrains, and up and down hills or inclines. For the wheelchair assistant, there are various hazards that should be considered for their safety.

The predominant injuries associated with a wheelchair assistant are from pushing, pulling, bending, and stopping the wheelchair. Commonly these create soft tissue injuries in the wrists, back, shoulders, neck, and knees. Rollback injuries can also occur with the assistant when the wheelchair user moves unexpectedly in the opposite direction. Wheelchair safety policies and protocols will help protect both the wheelchair user and the wheelchair assistant.

Tip & Tricks:

Communication is Key- It is essential to recognize that for wheelchair users, the wheelchair can be their primary means of mobility. Whereas the wheelchair assistant will rely on communication cues to be able to assist the user. The assistant will be asking for feedback, checking on the user's comfort, and responding to any questions or concerns that arise. That communication will help everyone so the assistant does not have to predict the user's movement. Remember, awkward positioning PLUS strain EQUALS soft tissue injuries or worse. When assistants have to act fast when a resident requires help, the assistant mustn't be put into an awkward position that could result in injuries.

Have a plan- Have the end destination in mind. Plan for the various hazards that you will encounter. Hazards can be congested areas, change in terrain, change in elevation, and noisy areas. When possible, avoid these

Editor's Note:

The KING Safety Matters newsletter is published monthly to provide general safety information. It is not a substitute for adequate safety training, or intended to provide complete safety information or training, on any specific subject. The information contained herein is intended to assist safety efforts and increase safety awareness.

To ensure the contents of the newsletter are helpful and important to you, please feel free to send comments, suggestions and feedback to:

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types of hazards as they can lead to confusion and/or a break in communication, wheels getting stuck, or uncontrolled movement, which could result in a pushing/pulling injury, and/or a slip, trip, and fall.

Respect Personal Space- As stated above, it's important to recognize that for the wheelchair user, the wheelchair should be considered part of their personal space. When the assistants are interacting with the wheelchair, they should treat it with respect. Participating in horseplay with a wheelchair and its user is never acceptable. Horseplay can result in injuries which can affect the user, the assistant, and other employees. Always ask before you touch the wheelchair and push the wheelchair at a slower walking pace to prevent anxiety for the user.

Regular Inspections- Inspect the wheelchairs regularly to be sure that all components are in good working order.

- Armrests- Check for sharp edges. Armrests and side panels are locked and tightened.
- Back support- Check for rips/tears. All hardware should be fully tightened and present. No cracks or bends in the metal.
- Seat- Check for rips/tears/sharp points. Ensure that the material is tight. Make sure that the seatbelt is in good working order.
- Wheel Locks- Check to make sure the brakes are working and that the tires are filled with air.

Additional, more comprehensive checklists are available, but those items are a great starting point. Regular maintenance and inspections of all equipment are proven techniques to reduce injuries in the workplace.

Watch for Obstacles- Often when the assistant is providing help in pushing a wheelchair, their focus is on what the wheelchair could collide with. However, not constantly scanning the area, looking down and around, could cause mishaps, such as damage to the wheelchair, the user, or both. We need to continuously watch for obstacles that could cause slips, trips, and falls incidents or damage to property. Walking in well-lit areas will help avoid obstacles that could cause damage and/or injuries. The goal is to protect everyone and everything, avoiding damage to the wheelchair or other property as well as injury to the user or the assistant.

Watch Your Feet- One of the leading incidents involving wheelchairs within KING is the assistant's foot getting rolled over by the wheelchair. Oftentimes, this does not happen when pushing from the back, but when assisting with other activities of daily living from the sides or front of the wheelchair. When the wheelchair is not in motion, always set the brakes. This will allow the assistant to approach the chair safely from the sides or front. Properly working brakes will prevent the wheelchair from moving. Never substitute the brakes of the wheelchair with your foot as a wheel stop. Maintain a safe distance from the wheelchair even when the brakes are set. Before assisting, look at the location of your feet to make sure they have a proper distance from the wheels.



Body Mechanics- Remember the body is a tool and good body mechanics is important. Try to avoid awkward positions that can cause injuries. These awkward positions, when combined with pushing/pulling can easily result in injury. The assistant needs to keep their back straight and their knees bent. Always try to push the wheelchair instead of pulling it. Avoid muscling the wheelchair by using the arms and legs and avoid stress and strain on the back. Keeping the wheelchair close to the assistant's body will minimize the efforts needed when a sudden stop occurs.

Continuous Training- Training is important in the effort to keep safe and protect the user and training should occur regularly. Continuous training will ensure that the staff knows and understands the hazards when being an assistant to wheelchair users.

Conclusion:

Remember to use proper body mechanics, understand the parts of the wheelchair, how to navigate different terrains, and communicate effectively with the wheelchair user. By empowering those who assist in pushing wheelchairs with the knowledge and skills necessary to safely assist the wheelchair users, goals to enhance overall mobility and minimize the risk of accidents or injuries can greatly improve.

