PATIENT HANDLING

Patient handling is a complex task that Emergency Service Organizations (ESOs) undertake every day. However, the basics of patient handling are often taken for granted and associated incidents can result in injury and damage to the responder, the patient, and the organization.

Industry statistics show that injuries to emergency service responders are significantly higher than the average occupational injury rate, as recorded in the Bureau of Labor Statistics database. Additionally, VFIS claims experience reports that patient handling incidents are a leading cause for claims of negligence. To help reduce these numbers, VFIS encourages ESOs to consider the following risk factors and recommendations.

RISK FACTORS

The incidence of patient handling events can be attributed to several areas:

- Lack of understanding of the complexities of patient handling
- Lack of situational awareness and identification of scene hazards
- Improper lifting techniques
- Failure to follow manufacturer recommendations
- Use of equipment in ways not recommended by the manufacturer or failure to use the equipment best suited for the job. Examples include:
  - Use of a household chair as a patient carrying device
  - Use of a wheelchair or stretcher on steps
  - Failure to use a lap-safety belt anytime a patient is in a wheelchair inside and outside of a wheelchair van
  - Failure to use all stretcher straps including the shoulder restraint system to secure the patient
  - Rolling stretchers sideways while patients are on the stretcher
  - Failure to have 2 trained responders in contact with stretchers when loaded with patients
  - Improper equipment repair and maintenance

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider the following general rules for safe patient handling:

- Provide initial and ongoing patient handling education and training
- Assess the location for environmental and situational hazards and adjust the task accordingly
- Know the physical capabilities of the crew
- Know the weight you are lifting
- Utilize proper lifting techniques and body mechanics
- Use equipment properly, for example:
    - Use equipment per manufacturer guidelines
    - Utilize all straps including shoulder restraint systems to secure patients to stretchers
    - Roll stretchers with patients at waist level and, for certain situations such as a larger or uncooperative patients, lower stretchers to their base level
    - Place lap safety belts on a clients in a wheelchair anytime they are inside and outside of the wheelchair van
    - Ensure there are adequate resources to make lifts safely
    - Follow manufacturer recommendations for routine and preventative maintenance

SUMMARY

Repetitive motions, sprains, strains, and tears are among the most common types of workplace injuries. By nature of their job, emergency responders have an increased risk of sustaining these types of traumas, confirming the significance of proper patient handling. Improper patient handling also leads to a substantial number of negligence claims. To help reduce these occurrences, it is important to utilize proper patient handling techniques in all response situations.

©2026 Glatfelter Insurance Group | All Rights Reserved. The information and recommendations offered by Glatfelter Insurance Group herein and in related materials are provided solely for your consideration in risk control efforts. Glatfelter Insurance Group specifically disclaims any liability for any act or omission by any person or entity in connection with the preparation, use or implementation of plans, principles, concepts or information contained in this publication. The information contained in this publication is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace expert advice in connection with the topics presented. The intent of this guideline is solely to assist you in reducing risk exposure to the public, personnel and property, and Glatfelter Insurance Group makes no warranty as to results. Your organization should review it and make the necessary modifications to meet the needs of your organization.