

Healthcare: Keeping Housekeeping Staff Safe



Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

Housekeeping staff working in healthcare play an important role in keeping the environment safe for patients, staff, and visitors. They may not provide direct clinical care to patients, but they work around patients, and in areas where clinical care has been given.

In this environment there are often body fluids or other potentially infectious and hazardous materials such as chemicals and discarded sharps or needles.

The housekeeping staff are at risk of becoming ill or injured in the healthcare setting without proper care, they may also increase the risk of patients and colleagues developing infections, illnesses or injuries.

What's the Danger?

Housekeeping staff are at risk of handling items contaminated with body fluids or infectious matter, such as crockery, clothing, clinical equipment, sanitaryware and waste bins.

They are often near patients who may be coughing, sneezing, or worse, and infectious matter can be inadvertently inhaled, ingested or spread onto skin or clothing.

As part of their vital role, housekeepers use various cleaning products that may cause sensitivity or chemical burns. The main form of defense for housekeepers is to wear gloves but this may also lead to latex allergy.

Cleaning floors increases the risk of housekeepers, and other people, slipping on the floor. In order to get to awkward places, housekeepers may be tempted to overreach or stand on furniture to get to these out of reach places, increasing their risk of falling.

How to Protect Yourself

6 easy ways to keep yourself safe as a housekeeper

1. Know what you are doing

- Have your schedule for the day.
- Check any particular policies for the particular area you are working.
- Check if there are any specific risks.

2. Stay on your feet

- If you are cleaning a floor stay off the wet areas:
 - put hazard boards out to warn others;
 - leave them there until floor completely dry;
 - do one side of a corridor first, so people have a dry side to walk on, where possible;
 - advise people not to rush; and
 - advise people to use handrail if they have to walk on wet stairs.
- Take note of any wet floor signs as you go about your work.
- Avoid excessive water splashing when filling buckets, water jugs etc.
- Clear up any spills immediately and put 'Wet Floor' signs out.

3. Be aware of chemicals

- Know what you are using.
 - Check label on container.
- Use only the correct cleaning agent for the correct process.
- Check it is in date.
 - Fresh solutions of diluted household bleach need to be made up every 24 hours.
- Never mix different detergents either in containers or on cloth.
- Wear gloves if indicated or if you have broken skin or skin sensitivity.
 - Use non-latex gloves if you are allergic or sensitive to latex.
- Get first aid immediately if:
 - a chemical splashes in or near your eyes;
 - you start having breathing difficulties;
 - you feel nauseous or vomit while using a detergent.

4. Don't touch

- Wear appropriate PPE.
- Use tools such as mops, dustpan and brush, and tongs, to avoid touching contaminated equipment, materials, or broken glass, even if wearing gloves.
- Equipment and work surfaces need cleaning after contamination.
- The location of contamination and the substance should be clearly labeled to keep others away.
- Grossly contaminated equipment and surfaces need cleaning with soapy water to remove obvious contaminants before disinfecting.
- Protective coverings such as plastic or aluminum foil should be discarded as soon as the equipment is finished with.
- Reusable containers should be checked and cleaned on a schedule.
 - Decontaminate immediately if contamination occurs.
- Broken glass should never be picked up with bare hands.
 - There is a risk of cutting yourself and the glass could be contaminated.

5. Use the laundry

- All laundry items should be bagged and moved to the laundry from the point of use.
- Laundry should not be rinsed in the care setting.
- Laundry should not be carried through the care environment, unless bagged.
- Contaminated laundry should be in melt away bags and suitably marked outer bags to alert laundry staff.

6. Be sharp

- Discarded, used sharps are a risk for all healthcare workers.
- Carefully check for and remove any discarded sharps before sending items to the laundry.
- Only dispose of sharps if you have received training.
- Carefully dispose of any sharps that you use in an appropriate container.
 - Do not push the sharp into the container.
 - Do not overfill the container.
 - Do not put hand or fingers into the container.
 - Do not try and open a closed container.
 - Dispose of full containers correctly.
- Report to your supervisor if you find improperly discarded sharps in your working environment.
 - It is not acceptable for clinical staff to leave them for you to find and clear away.
- If you handle a sharp and it punctures or grazes your skin, complete the relevant injury report.

Final Word

Housekeepers are valuable members of the healthcare team. They are exposed to many of the same risks as other healthcare workers. In many cases they are at higher risk, cleaning up after clinical staff have finished what they were doing and rushed onto their next patient. Housekeepers need to be extra vigilant to keep themselves, their colleagues, patients and visitors safe.