



SAFETY IN THE COMMUNITY

Objectives:

Upon completion of this program, the home health aide (HHA) will be able to:

- ❑ Recognized potentially dangerous situations
- ❑ Identify ways to reduce the risk of someone being a personal victim of crime
- ❑ Identify actions to take in dangerous situations

Facts

The fact is not every home health patient will live in a safe community. Even communities most would deem “safe” aren’t always safe, so taking the proper precautions when out and about is critical. It’s easy to become complacent once you are familiar with a patient and a particular community. This familiarity is usually a healthy and safe development. It’s nice to know your patients and their family members and know your way around. However, letting familiarity get in that way of taking precautions to keep yourself safe is dangerous.

Avoiding dangerous situations is all about prevention. You must always be on guard. You can lock a car 99% of the time, but you are vulnerable during the 1% of the time you don’t. When taking preventive measures, you may find that nothing bad happens to you. Because of this, you might begin to feel more relaxed and omit some preventive measures, such as locking your car or taking a better-lit street. It is reasonable to assume that nothing bad has happened in part *because* you’ve conscientiously used those prevention methods. You might never know the time you *almost* got mugged or the time your car *almost* got stolen.

Key Terms to Aid Your Understanding

❑ Opportunity offender

- ❑ A criminal who commits crimes that are convenient to the criminal (i.e., waits until he or she sees an opportunity to act out a crime)

❑ Prevention

- ❑ Stopping something from happening or existing

Awareness

A certain type of criminal is known as an “opportunity offender.” an opportunity offender is very observant and waits until he or she discovers an opportunity for a crime. For example, if an opportunity offender figures out that someone leaves his or her home every night at 7 p.m., the offender might decide to rob that house at 7:15p.m. or, if the offender notices someone listening to loud music and carrying a designer purse, he or she might decide that person is an easy target to mug.

Awareness (continue...)

The following methods are simple enough. You don't need to be paranoid or on high alert all the time. Simply being aware of your surroundings and using a few best safety practices will likely help you stay out of danger's way. There are numerous factors that increase a person's risk for workplace violence. You, as an HHA, encounter many of those factors in doing your work because you:

- Are in frequent contact with the public, not only at your job in patients' homes but also traveling to and from your assignments
- Work alone
- Work in community-based settings
- Are often driving late in the evening or in the early-morning hours
- May work in neighborhoods considered to be high –crime areas

For all these reasons, you know that you are at a greater risk for violence in your job than many other people. Therefore, it is very important that you are constantly aware of that possibility. While there is no guarantee that you will never be a victim of violence, there are many things you can do to reduce that risk.

Don't Be A Target

Being a victim of crime is never your fault; it's the person who is breaking the law that is to blame. However, it's smart to recognize small ways to reduce the likelihood of becoming a target. The following suggestions do not take a lot of time or effort and can save you from a dangerous situation:

- Increase awareness in places you're most comfortable
- Trust your instincts regardless of whether you're feeling embarrassed
- Prepare your schedule daily with safety in mind

Before leaving home

- ❑ Wear scrubs and a name badge that identify you as a nursing caregiver.
- ❑ Lock your purse in the trunk. Use pockets or a fanny pack to carry your driver's license, cell phone, pens, and other essentials.
- ❑ Make it clear that you do not carry drugs or needles in your nursing bag.
- ❑ Keep your car in good running order with safe tires, a good battery, and plenty of gas.
- ❑ Review your schedule for the day. Make sure you know how to get to each location on your agenda. If you are making a first-time visit, call the patient to confirm exactly where the house or apartment is located if you're unsure. It's also a good idea to know where the nearest fire or police stations are in the areas you will be visiting.
- ❑ Securely pin a spare car key inside a pocket in case your keys are stolen or you accidentally lock yourself out of your car.
- ❑ Check the mirror. Make certain you are not wearing jewelry that looks expensive or tempting to a thief. Avoid wearing chains or necklaces around your neck that could possibly be used by someone to choke you.
- ❑ Mentally remind yourself that you could possibly become a victim, that you will be alert all day, in every place you go, and that you will constantly observe the people around you.
- ❑ Develop a look of purpose and self-confidence that you will keep all day.
- ❑ Attend classes on personal safety and self-defense.

In The Car...

- ❑ Map out the route to the patient's home in advance so you know where you are going.
- ❑ Inform the person what time you will be arriving. Call if you will be late or plans, change.
- ❑ When you leave home, make certain that your supplies are packed close at hand to reduce the amount of time you will have to spend getting them out of the car.
- ❑ Have the car key ready when walking to your car.
- ❑ Check the seats and floor before unlocking the car to ensure there is no one in your vehicle.
- ❑ Lock the car as soon as you get into it and always drive with the doors locked.
- ❑ Do not sit in your car to chart.
- ❑ Request an escort in potentially dangerous areas.
- ❑ If someone is a safety problem, schedule visits when they are away from the home.
- ❑ If another person (such as a family member) escorts you, avoid unfamiliar shortcuts and never get into someone else's car.

In The Car (continue...)

- ❑ Never stop to assist someone whose car appears to have broken down.
- ❑ Never transport anyone in your car, not even a member of the patient's family.
- ❑ If you are being followed, drive to the nearest police or fire station and honk your horn until someone comes out. If that is not possible, drive to the nearest busy gas station or other area where there are people around.
- ❑ If someone approaches your car at an intersection, do not roll down the window. If you feel threatened, honk your horn.
- ❑ If your car breaks down, stay inside and pull on the hazard lights. If someone approaches, roll down the window very slightly and ask the person to call the police for you. Do not get out of your car.
- ❑ Park as close as possible to your patient's residence, and in a well-lighted area.
- ❑ Look around before getting out of your car.
- ❑ Take only what you require for the visit as you leave the car, and lock it immediately when you get out.
- ❑ If you use a GPS system, do not leave it on the dashboard when you enter a home.
- ❑ If police or fire departments block off the street on which the patient lives, go to a safe area and telephone your supervisor.

Using Public Transportation

If you take public transportation, keep your valuables close to you. Don't let purses or bags hang off your shoulder in crowded situations. If you're riding the subway or bus during off-peak hours, sit in the conductor's car or near the front of the bus. Avoid falling asleep. Don't use your phone or let your personal belongings hanging off of you near subway or bus doors so you can avoid someone snatching them from you as they exit. Do not enter empty subway car. If someone on the subway you are in makes you feel uneasy, switch cars at the next stop (but make note if you are followed). If possible, avoid seldom- populated stops, if possible.

Walking to the patient's home

- ❑ Walk with confidence at a steady pace that indicates you know where you are going.
- ❑ Be alert to the people around you.
- ❑ Avoid dark, deserted areas. Never take shortcuts through alleys or vacant lots or past abandoned buildings.
- ❑ Try to stay in well-lighted areas.
- ❑ Walk in the center of the sidewalk, away from doorways and lines of parked cars.
- ❑ If someone calls out to you from a parked car, never approach the vehicle. Reply from a distance.
- ❑ If a stranger approaches you while you are walking, be courteous and respectful. Keep eye contact with the person, stay several feet away, and make it clear that you are expected somewhere nearby. Try to not appear frightened or nervous. If the person ask for money, explain that you are an HHA and do not carry any.
- ❑ Avoid groups of people gathered outside. Cross the street if necessary until you are past them.
- ❑ If you feel you are in trouble, attract attention any way you can. Yell "Fire!" Make lots of noise, blow a whistle, or activate a noise alarm if you have one.
- ❑ If you are bothered by someone driving a car while you're walking, switch directions. (Turning around and going back the direction you came in will help ensure the driver cannot follow you. Do not walk too close to the curb.)

Within the home or apartment

- Look inside an elevator before you enter it. Once in it, stand nearest the door and control panel. If someone enters and you feel unsafe, get out. If you feel unsafe in the elevator, press the next floor's button and get off as soon as possible.
- Avoid using stairwells in high-rise apartments.
- If there is no answer at the door of the patient's home or apartment, do not knock on strangers' doors to see if they know where the patient might be.
- Even if the patient wants you to, never just "knock and walk in." Tell the patient you will not enter until he or she either comes to the door or verbally calls out to you.
- If there are strange people in the patient's home or apartment and they appear intoxicated or verbally abusive, leave immediately and telephone the office when you can safely do so.
- Notify the supervisor immediately if you observe openly displayed guns or other weapons in the home.
- If you find an unusual situation outside a patient's apartment or home (e.g., a large group of people who are fighting), go back to your car and call your supervisor as soon as you safely can.

Recognized Possible Signs Of Impending Violence

Stay alert and pay close attention to what people say and do. Be aware that anyone can become violent under the right circumstances. This might include anyone on the street, your patients, their families or visitors, or even coworkers in the office. Not everyone will show warning signs that he or she may become violent, but there are some signs you can watch for. They include:

- Being intoxicated or apparently under the influence of drugs
- Using an angry or threatening tone of voice
- Making threats
- Being “out of control,” such as shouting, screaming, or cursing
- Nervous pacing or extreme restlessness
- Clenching fists or tightly holding on to an object that could be used as a weapon
- Openly displaying a gun or other weapon
- Appearing to hear voices when there is no one else around

Recognized Possible Signs Of Impending Violence (continued...)

While there is no set formula for the best method of handling people who appear to be threatening violence, some actions are usually recommended:

- Stay calm and maintain self-control
- Don't turn your back on the person, but always try to stay several feet away. If you are in a home, do not let the person back you into a corner- move in different ways, preferably closer to the door.
- Listen to the person and do not act disrespectfully. Don't stare, but maintain steady eye contact.
- Do not use an angry tone of voice. Talk slowly and softly in a nonthreatening manner.
- If you are in a patient's home, try to divert the person. Offer him or her drink of water or some food.
- Have several thoughts in mind. Do whatever you can to help the person calm down.
- If the person demands your supply bag or anything you have, give it to him or her.

Recognized Possible Signs Of Impending Violence (continued...)

Remember:

- Always be alert and take all possible precautions.
- Learn and follow your agency's safety policy.
- Know how and where to report and document the information if you feel there are safety concerns in the home.
- Learn and follow your agency's guidelines on reporting your travel schedule for the day.
- Never remain in a home or apartment if you feel unsafe. Leave immediately and telephone your supervisor as soon as you safely can.
- If you are the victim of violence at work, immediately seek medical attention. Afterward, seek all the help that your agency provides. This may include talking with someone in the employee assistance program (EAP). Be aware that you should not minimize the effect the violence may have had on you. Do not ignore or brush aside the opportunity to talk about your experience with the people who may be able to help you. Don't hide your feelings from them or pretend the incident didn't affect you.

General Safety

The best thing you can always do for your safety is be aware of your surroundings. Being on the phone, listening to music, daydreaming, reading, browsing Facebook—these can all take your mind to another place. It can be relaxing, but it can also be dangerous. It takes little effort to wait until you are certain you're in a safer environment to do any of these things. Simply being able to hear and having your head up instead of looking down at your phone can be one of the most important things you ever do. Pay attention when crossing streets looking both ways and using crosswalks. When walking down a street just as when you're driving, be aware of who is behind you and in front of you.

Never leave personal valuables in the cab of the car; leave them in the trunk. Bring only what you need into the patient's home. If you park on the street, always be careful exiting the car and make sure you look around first. Always check that you have enough gas to get back and forth from patient residences, and know your emergency numbers. Always lock all the doors. If your car breaks down, staying in your car is usually the best option, to avoid getting hit by other cars and to create a barrier between yourself and anyone you might not want to encounter.

General Safety (continued...)

When exiting a patient's home, don't get on the phone or any device that might distract you. Have your car keys ready. Park near a light if possible and as close as possible to the residence. Report any criminal activity you might witness to your supervisor.

Always carry your cell phone; make sure it's charged and always take note if you don't have service in certain areas. Remember that carrying your cell for emergencies is a good idea, but being buried in your phone all the time will distract you from possible dangers. Always assess a situation before making a call; if possible, get to a safer place first—one that is public and well lit, such as a store. If you think you may be being followed, head for a public area. Whether in a car or on foot, if you suspect you are being followed, do not go home. Go to a public area or a police station, fire station, or hospital.

Outcomes and the HHA

Your personal safety is paramount while working as an HHA. The agency does not want you in dangerous situations and should provide you the resources and support needed to keep you safe as possible while recognizing inherent risks or the job. While patients rely you for care, you do no one any favors if you place yourself in dangerous situations. Discuss with your supervisor if you feel that you are unsafe while giving care. Brainstorm methods to keep yourself safer together.

CMS' Expectations

As a result of the Outcome and Assessment Information Set (OASIS), the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) reviews the quality outcomes and processes regarding the care an HHA provides. It also reviews potentially avoidable events. It expects that HHAs will use the information available for their quality improvement programs. CMS expects an agency's quality improvement efforts to take a multidisciplinary approach in meeting and improving the care needs of its patients.