

THE ADVISOR

MONTHLY COMPLIANCE COMMUNICATOR

Sterilization and Disinfection: Common Mistakes to Avoid!

Mistakes can be costly – not only to your practice but also to patients. Each step in sterilization and disinfection is important and must be followed to ensure a safe practice and patient environment. This article will focus on common mistakes found and how to prevent them.

One of the most common mistakes found is removing wet packages from the sterilizer. Wet packages are not considered sterile. Wet packages have moisture in them and are subject to “wicking”. Wicking allows microorganisms to enter through the packaging and results in recontamination of the sterile instruments. Wet packs can also cause corrosion of the instruments. It is essential that wet packs are identified, repackaged, and re-sterilized.

Common causes of wet packs include improper loading, insufficient drying time, or issues with the autoclave itself. Improper loading such as overloading or incorrect placement are the most common means of wet packages, and this is an operator error. Autoclaves should never be overloaded this prevents airflow and drying. Pouches should be placed in the autoclave, following manufacturer instructions for use to allow drying. This means they must not be close together or overlapping. The items should be arranged so all surfaces will be directly exposed to the sterilizing agent. The Centers for Disease

Control (CDC) recommends the following in loading a sterilizer: perforated trays should be placed so the tray is parallel to the shelf; nonperforated containers should be placed on their edge; and peel packs should be placed on edge in perforated or mesh bottom racks or baskets. Peel packs on their edge are placed paper to plastic in the rack. Follow those instructions for use of the autoclave if laying the pouches down in the tray whether it is plastic or paper side up.

Autoclave issues such as poor steam quality, draining issues or autoclave malfunction should be addressed with your service techs to correct these problems. Poor steam quality traps the steam

Newsletter Content

**Sterilization and
Disinfection: Common
Mistakes to Avoid!**

**Workplace Violence
Awareness**

**Respecting Patient Privacy:
A Reminder About Proper
Access to Records**

and can contribute to wet packages. Clogged or partially clogged drains can prevent proper drainage of condensation and, lastly, the autoclave may have a broken valve which could also be the cause.

Another common mistake is not folding the pouches correctly. The plastic/peel pack must be sealed on the perforation. Sealing the pouches correctly helps to maintain sterility of the contents, thus ensuring they remain safe for use. The proper seal prevents contamination by microorganisms, air, and moisture to the contents. A properly sealed package is essential for effective sterilization; it allows the sterilizing agent to penetrate the pack and reach all surfaces of the items inside. Lastly, a properly sealed package ensures aseptic presentation allowing healthcare professionals to open and use the contents without contaminating the contents inside the pack.

All packages, bagged, or wrapped instruments should be opened at the point of use. Opening the packages directly at the chairside, when patients are seated, helps maintain sterility and prevents cross-contamination. It also gives the patients assurance that the instruments have been sterilized and are safe for use.

A few other common errors found in healthcare are touching keyboards in operatories with contaminated gloves, not having on gloves when removing contaminated laundry from laundry basket, and disinfectant wipe containers left open.

Keyboards can become contaminated with bacteria, potentially leading to the spread of pathogens. The risk to patients and workers remains a subject of ongoing research. However, studies indicate that keyboards show high contamination often with pathogens like MRSA and E. coli. Barriers can be used to prevent contamination. Barriers must be changed between patients or when touched with contaminated gloves and hands. There are infection control keyboards specifically designed for easier cleaning that are becoming popular in healthcare. CDC recommends regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces such as keyboards. There are hospital-grade disinfectants that are safe to use on electronic devices. However, it is crucial that you follow the manufacturer's guidelines for the disinfectant and the keyboard to ensure proper cleaning and to prevent damage to the keyboard.

Healthcare workers must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves when removing contaminated laundry from the laundry basket. Remember, jackets are soiled with blood or other potentially infectious materials. They should be laundered according to the practice's infection control protocols. When the healthcare worker has removed PPE, hands must be washed thoroughly according to CDC.

Lastly, a common error in healthcare is disinfectant wipe containers that are left open. This will cause the wipes to dry out, reducing their effectiveness and potentially contaminating the remaining wipes. Proper storage with the container sealed is crucial to maintain the wipes moisture and disinfectant properties. Leaving the container open, the liquid will evaporate, thus drying the wipes out. To prevent drying the wipes out and contaminating the remaining wipes, the container should be closed tightly after each use.

Your practice must have infection control protocols in place and following these, along with CDC and other agencies recommendations, will make for less mistakes and a safe, healthful environment for all.

Workplace Violence Awareness

While some jobs may appear low risk, they often have hidden issues like workplace tension, burnout, and dissatisfaction. Conflicts in meetings, frustrated patients, and sudden resignations can create a sense of discomfort. Although these incidents may not receive widespread attention, they are nonetheless significant and can greatly affect workplace dynamics.

It's crucial to understand that "violence" in the workplace encompasses more than just physical harm; it extends to verbal abuse, intimidation tactics, and other behaviors that can severely undermine an individual's psychological safety and overall well-being. According to data from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), approximately 2 million U.S. Healthcare workers report experiencing some form of workplace violence.

Workplace violence encompasses a wide range of alarming behaviors from verbal abuse and threatening gestures to physical assaults and even more extreme situations. Healthcare workers stand out as particularly vulnerable to such incidents. According to the 2025 Employee Safety Report, a striking statistic reveals that over one in four healthcare workers in the United States has encountered workplace violence. This statistic highlights the need for heightened awareness and protective measures within the healthcare environment.

Raising awareness is the first step in preventing workplace violence. Many incidents go unreported because employees fear retaliation or believe no action will be taken. By promoting open communication and providing education, organizations can empower employees to recognize warning signs and report their concerns without fear.

Utilizing the following steps as a guideline to mitigate workplace violence will help employees to speak up when an incident occurs:

1. **Develop a Policy:** It is essential to establish a clear policy that defines unacceptable behaviors and outlines procedures for reporting and addressing incidents of workplace violence.
2. **Provide Training:** Annual training can empower employees to recognize warning signs, utilize de-escalation techniques, and understand emergency response protocols to manage situations.
3. **Foster a Supportive Culture:** It is important to cultivate an environment that promotes open communication. Employees should feel secure and supported when voicing concerns.
4. **Security Measures:** Conducting a thorough assessment of potential workplace hazards can enhance security.
5. **Create a Workplace Violence Response Plan:** Establishing a clear and actionable response plan for handling incidents is crucial. This plan should include communication protocols, emergency contacts, and post-incident support for employees who may be affected.

Employers can greatly enhance workplace safety by implementing these recommendations. While cultivating a positive organizational culture is crucial, it alone cannot eliminate the risk of violence. Therefore, thorough preparation is essential to safeguard your workplace from potential threats.

Respecting Patient Privacy: A Reminder About Proper Access to Records

As your HIPAA compliance partner, we want to remind all staff that **unauthorized access to patient records—also known as “snooping”—is a serious HIPAA violation.** Even in small, tight-knit practices, patient privacy must always be respected. Curiosity is not a valid reason to look at someone’s protected health information (PHI), and doing so can lead to termination, fines, and permanent consequences for the employee and the practice.

What Is Snooping?

Snooping is any access to PHI without a job-related reason. Common examples include:

- Looking up your neighbor’s upcoming appointment.
- Accessing your ex-partner’s chart out of curiosity.
- Viewing your coworker’s medication list just because you can.
- Inspecting VIP patient records.

Even if you don’t print, share, or speak about the information, **accessing a patient’s record without a legitimate work need is still a HIPAA violation.**

Why It Matters

The HIPAA Privacy Rule is clear: patients have a right to keep their health information confidential. That right applies whether the patient is a stranger, a friend, or someone you see at the grocery store.

Consequences of snooping can include:

- Termination of employment.
- Fines and possible individual liability.
- Mandatory reporting to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).
- Loss of trust from patients and community members.

Real Example: Small Practice, Big Consequences

In a recent enforcement action involving **a small orthopedic practice in Georgia**, a staff member was caught accessing the records of several individuals, including a former classmate and a local business owner, out of curiosity. The breach was identified during a routine access audit. Although the employee claimed they “just wanted to see” what happened with a former patient, the practice was required to report the incident to HHS and notify the affected individuals. The employee was **terminated immediately**, and the incident triggered an investigation that took several months to resolve. While the practice avoided major fines due to quick internal response, the reputational impact in the small community was significant.

This case underscores a key message: **snooping in a small practice is just as serious as in a large hospital.**

How to Protect Yourself and avoid unintentional violations:

- Only access records when it’s part of your assigned duties.
- Do not look at the PHI of family, friends, or anyone you’re not directly treating or supporting.
- Keep login credentials private and log out when stepping away.
- Report any suspected unauthorized access immediately.

We understand that in small practices, it can feel like “everyone knows everyone.” But that makes patient privacy even more critical. Patients trust us to protect their information, and HIPAA requires that we do.

HIPAA compliance starts with daily decisions. Snooping is never worth the risk.

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Print and post newsletter in office for staff review. Each member should sign this form when completed. Keep on file as proof of training on these topics.

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