
What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence ranges from offensive or threatening language to homicide. NIOSH defines workplace violence as violent acts (including physical assaults and threats of assaults) directed toward persons at work or on duty.

Examples of violence include the following:

Threats: Expressions of intent to cause harm, including verbal threats, threatening body language, and written threats.

Physical assaults: Attacks ranging from slapping and beating to rape, homicide, and the use of weapons such as firearms, bombs, or knives.

Muggings: Aggravated assaults, usually conducted by surprise and with intent to rob.

Who is at risk?

Although anyone working in a hospital may become a victim of violence, nurses and aides who have the most direct contact with patients are at higher risk. Other hospital personnel at increased risk of violence include emergency response personnel, hospital safety officers, and all health care providers.

Where may violence occur?

Violence may occur anywhere in the hospital, but it is most frequent in the following areas:

- Psychiatric wards
- Emergency rooms
- Waiting rooms
- Geriatric units

What are the effects of violence?

The effects of violence can range in intensity and include the following:

- Minor physical injuries
- Serious physical injuries
- Temporary and permanent physical disability
- Psychological trauma
- Death

Violence may also have negative organizational outcomes such as low worker morale, increased job stress, increased worker turnover, reduced trust of management and coworkers, and a hostile working environment.

What are the risk factors for violence?

The risk factors for violence vary from hospital to hospital depending on location, size, and type of care. Common risk factors for hospital violence include the following:

- Working directly with volatile people, especially, if they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol or have a history of violence or certain psychotic diagnoses
- Working when understaffed-especially during meal times and visiting hours
- Transporting patients
- Long waits for service
- Overcrowded, uncomfortable waiting rooms
- Working alone
- Poor environmental design
- Inadequate security
- Lack of staff training and policies for preventing and managing crises with potentially volatile patients
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Access to firearms
- Unrestricted movement of the public
- Poorly lit corridors, rooms, parking lots, and other areas

Safety Tips for Hospital Workers

Watch for signals that may be associated with impending violence:

- Verbally expressed anger and frustration
- Body language such as threatening gestures
- Signs of drug or alcohol use
- Presence of a weapon

Maintain behavior that helps diffuse anger:

- Present a calm, caring attitude.
- Don't match the threats.
- Don't give orders.
- Acknowledge the person's feelings (for example, "I know you are frustrated").
- Avoid any behavior that may be interpreted as aggressive (for example, moving rapidly, getting too close, touching, or speaking loudly).

Be alert:

- Evaluate each situation for potential violence when you enter a room or begin to relate to a patient or visitor.
- Be vigilant throughout the encounter.
- Don't isolate yourself with a potentially violent person.
- Always keep an open path for exiting-don't let the potentially violent person stand between you and the door.

Take these steps if you can't defuse the situation quickly:

- Remove yourself from the situation.
- Call security for help.
- Report any violent incidents to your management.