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O&P Risk Advisor

RISK MANAGEMENT NEWSLETTER FOR THE ORTHOTICS & PROSTHETICS BUSINESS OWNER

Keeping patients safe: Prevent falls

According to the National Safety Council, more than 7.9 million Americans were injured in a fall in 2007. Using orthotics and prostheses can increase the risk for falls if patients aren't taught to use them correctly and to keep their environment safe. Patients have been injured during orthotic and prosthetic fittings as a result of poorly constructed devices, malfunctioning parts, and orthotics and prostheses that were inadequately fitted. Here are some tips for reducing risk for your patients.

Assess for risk factors

Determine if your patient is at risk for a fall. Risk factors include weakness, a prior fall, poor vision, dizziness or vertigo, postural hypotension, problems with gait or balance, arthritis, and cognitive deficiencies. Diuretic, anti-arrhythmic, and psychotropic drugs can also contribute to falls. Ask your patients if they have any of these risk factors before you begin a fitting. Assess the device for structural safety and make sure the manufacturer's guidelines are followed. If the device malfunctions before or during a fitting, document the problem immediately and alert the manufacturer.

Supervise your patients closely while they're at your facility. Don't leave patients alone, even for less than a minute, when they're trying on a device. The patient should be in immediate contact with the parallel bars during the initial trial with a new device or following an adjustment of an existing device. Because patients are unfamiliar with the devices, a fall or injury can happen in a matter of seconds.

Have a program in place at your business to prevent slips and falls. Use a safety checklist (see *Safety checklist for your business*), and make improvements as needed. Your plan should include routine inspections and policies on what should be done if a patient falls during

Safety checklist for your business

Exterior

- Is the parking lot paved and free of potholes?
- Are there handicapped parking signs?
- Are sidewalks even and free from cracks?
- Is there standing water after a rainstorm?
- Is lighting sufficient?
- Are pedestrian pathways and parking dividers clearly marked?
- Do stairs have handrails?
- Do you have a plan for ice and snow removal?
- Do you have mats outside your door to encourage removal of snow or ice before people enter the building?

Interior

- Is lighting sufficient throughout the building, including stairwells?
- Do stairs have handrails?
- Are stairs covered with anti-slip material?
- Are floors even and free of slippery sealants or waxes?
- Are carpets firmly in place?

a fitting. Keep accurate records of your prevention steps and have sufficient general liability insurance coverage in case a patient falls.

Provide education

Education is key to avoid slips and falls, especially as patients grow accustomed to their orthotics and prostheses. Make sure you provide adequate training while fitting their devices and that they feel comfortable and stable with them before they leave your facility. Give patients brochures, videos, or other teaching aids they can take home that can help them understand their devices and use them correctly. Provide detailed instructions on how to avoid slips and falls depending on the device used (for example, what surfaces to avoid when using

a prosthetic leg; what a properly fitting ankle brace should feel like). Advise them to call your facility immediately if they have any problems with the device once they return home.

Patients should return periodically for alignment of their orthotics and prostheses as their walking improves. Document in the patient's medical record the date of the instruction and the specific instructions given. Provide adjustments and additional educational materials if needed. Document all problems or malfunctions seen with the device.

If a patient falls...

Despite your best efforts, patients may fall. Tell patients that if they fall to try to relax and "roll" with the fall instead of keeping their body stiff. Your follow up should include:

- **Assess for—and treat—any injuries.** Check the patient's vital signs and look for bruising, and any neurologic problems.
- **Determine the cause of the fall.** Did the patient not understand how to correctly use the orthotic or prosthesis? Was there a problem with the device itself?
- **Prevent recurrence.** Depending on the cause, take action to avoid another fall. You might provide additional safety instruction in how to walk on gravel using a prosthesis, for example. Let patients know who to contact if their device malfunctions.

Remember to document your actions in the patient's medical record.

Protect your patients

Keep your patients from injuring themselves using a new orthotic or prosthetic through careful assessment, effective education, and quick response if they do fall.

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The Aon Orthotics & Prosthetics insurance program strives to provide you with the best insurance solutions and service—and now provides you with risk management information tailored to meet your needs as an O&P business owner. We are proud to bring our expertise, market knowledge, and unparalleled client services abilities to you—our valued O&P client.

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Leaving your mark

Many O&P practitioners enter the profession because they're passionate about improving the quality of life for people with limb challenges. Often, business owners need to shift their focus to marketing, finding patients, and referral sources. Marketing is incredibly important and can be successful in helping a business grow. Let your passion for the industry come through in your marketing message and it won't be overlooked.

Referrals. When targeting physicians for referrals, keep in mind that you may not actually get to speak to the physician but instead to an office manager who plays a key role in the decision-making process. Determine what sets you apart from the competition and uncover the needs of your prospective referral sources to see how you can improve the services they're currently receiving.

In-services. Educational in-services are another great way to branch out a business. This

is an opportunity for business owners to get to know potential referral sources, spread awareness, and showcase your expert knowledge. Distribute materials such as brochures and patient education pamphlets to leave a lasting effect.

Testimonials. Don't underestimate the benefits of outstanding work—patient testimonials can be a large part of your success. Patients are glad to pass along your information if they feel they have received exceptional service. Everyone you treat is another referral source. The most effective salesperson is a satisfied customer.

Your Community. Getting involved within the community is another great way to market your services. In addition to recreational marketing within local communities, business owners should become members of the Chamber of Commerce and network with other business owners within the community.

Promote new office locations, new employees, new services and products, and awards your business might have received. A referral source might not realize all of your capabilities.

Your Website. Websites are great portals into your business without ever leaving home. Patients and physicians seeking specific information are likely to turn to your website before calling directly. Enlist the help of someone more experienced who can help you with the design as well as help with what keywords are most commonly searched to help potential patients or their physicians to come across your page.

Letting your passion for the industry come through in your marketing message is the key to your success when it comes to marketing, finding patients, and referral sources. Keeping active, choosing a variety of marketing activities and being an expert in your field will help your O&P business continue to grow.

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