

OCCUPATIONAL RISKS

Medical Assisting is a profession with many rewards, as practitioners can perform both administrative and clinical services, filling several roles in a variety of healthcare environments. The Bureau of Labor Statistics clearly outlines that it is a growth field, with an anticipated 18% growth from 2020 to 2030.

Medical Assistants work directly with providers and patients, with the goal of providing healthcare and ensuring patient safety. It is a position with a great deal of responsibility.

As with any healthcare position, there are certain occupational risks that come into play with being a medical assistant, and those hazards include the following:

- Exposure to infectious diseases
- Sharps injuries
- Bloodborne pathogens and biological hazards
- Chemical and drug exposure
- Ergonomic hazards from lifting, sitting, and repetitive tasks
- Latex allergies
- Violence
- Stress

Although it is possible to prevent or reduce these hazards, healthcare workers continue to experience injuries and illness at work. There are protections set up with the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), and those protections are particularly important within a healthcare environment. OSHA has a series of standards that protect the safety of healthcare workers and patients.

Accredited medical assisting programs are required to teach students about the hazards that they face on the job and the protocols that can be put into place to ensure a workplace culture that prioritizes safety.

Infectious Agents

Infectious agents are organisms that are capable of producing infection or infectious disease. They include bacteria, fungi, viruses, and parasites. Healthcare workers have a high risk of contact with infectious agents due to the various types of activities involved with their jobs and the possibilities of contamination.

- [Bloodborne Pathogens \(BBP\): HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C](#)
- Influenza (FLU)
 - [Seasonal](#)
 - [Pandemic](#)
 - [Avian Swine](#)

- [Ebola](#)
- [Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus \(MRSA\)](#)
- [Tuberculosis \(TB\)](#)
- [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome \(SARS\)](#)
- [Middle East Respiratory Syndrome \(MERS\)](#)

Healthcare workers (HCWs) are occupationally exposed to a variety of infectious diseases during the performance of their duties. The delivery of healthcare services requires a broad range of workers. The diversity among HCWs and their workplaces makes occupational exposure to infectious diseases especially challenging. For example, not all workers in the same healthcare facility, not all individuals with the same job title, and not all healthcare facilities will be at equal risk of occupational exposure to infectious agents.

What are bloodborne pathogens?

Bloodborne pathogens are infectious microorganisms in human blood that can cause disease in humans. These pathogens include, but are not limited to, hepatitis B (HBV), hepatitis C (HCV) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Needlesticks and other sharps-related injuries may expose workers to bloodborne pathogens. Workers in many occupations, including first responders, housekeeping personnel in some industries, nurses and other healthcare personnel, all may be at risk for exposure to bloodborne pathogens.

Several OSHA standards and directives are directly applicable to protecting workers against transmission of infectious agents. These include OSHA's [Bloodborne Pathogens standard \(29 CFR 1910.1030\)](#) which provides protection of workers from exposures to blood and body fluids that may contain bloodborne infectious agents; OSHA's [Personal Protective Equipment standard \(29 CFR 1910.132\)](#) and [Respiratory Protection standard \(29 CFR 1910.134\)](#) which provide protection for workers when exposed to contact, droplet and airborne transmissible infectious agents; and OSHA's *TB compliance directive* which protects workers against exposure to TB through enforcement of existing applicable OSHA standards and the General Duty Clause of the OSH Act.

Chemical Hazards

Many hazardous chemicals are present in healthcare settings, which may pose an exposure risk for healthcare workers, patients, and others. These chemicals are used to do the following:

- Treat patients (e.g., antineoplastic drugs, aerosolized medications, anesthetic gases)
- Clean, disinfect and sterilize work surfaces (e.g., phenolics, quaternary ammonium compounds, bleach) and medical supplies and instruments (e.g., ethylene oxide, glutaraldehyde)
- As a fixative for tissue specimens (e.g., xylene, toluene, formaldehyde)

Surgical smoke generated by lasers and electrosurgical devices during surgical procedures contains many chemical substances, in addition to viruses and bacteria.

Physical Hazards

Musculoskeletal disorders are a major concern in occupational healthcare. Injuries occur frequently and are often due to repeated handling of patients, which involves heavy manual lifting when transferring or repositioning patients and working in extremely awkward positions. Lifting becomes more difficult by the increasing weight of patients to be lifted due to the obesity epidemic in the United States and an increasing number of elderly people who require assistance with daily living activities.

Latex Allergies

Latex, also known as rubber or natural latex, is derived from a milky fluid found in rubber trees. Latex allergy is a reaction to certain proteins found in natural latex. Latex allergy may cause allergic reactions ranging from sneezing or a runny nose to anaphylaxis, a potentially life-threatening condition. Healthcare workers exposed to rubber gloves and other latex-containing medical devices are at risk of developing latex allergy.

Work Stress & Mental Health

Work stress refers to the harmful physical and emotional effects when job requirements do not match workers' resources or needs. Work stress can lead to poor mental and physical health. Mental health includes a person's psychological, emotional, and social well-being and affects how we feel, think, and act.

Working conditions have traditionally been challenging for healthcare workers.

Work in healthcare often involves:

- Intensely stressful and emotional situations in caring for those who are sick
- Exposure to human suffering and bereavement
- Unique pressures from relationships with the patient, family members, and employers
- Working conditions with ongoing risk for hazardous exposures such as to COVID-19, other infectious diseases, hazardous drugs, and more
- Demanding physical work and risk of injuries such as from patient handling
- For many health workers, unstable and unpredictable work lives, and financial strain

Many healthcare workers place the ***well-being of others before self***. On the surface, this dedication to patients is admirable. However, it can ultimately be harmful if it delays or prevents workers from getting the help that they need for their own health and well-being.