

# Workplace Violence Safety Guide

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## When Patients Attack: Workplace Violence Safety

Jennifer flinches every time she hears yelling in the hallway. Last month, a patient threw a water pitcher at her. Now she jumps at every loud noise. Does this sound familiar?

You're not alone. Workplace violence against nurses is more common than you might think.

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## What Is Workplace Violence in Healthcare?

Workplace violence (WPV) is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It's not just physical attacks. It includes many forms of harmful behavior.

Think of it like a storm. Sometimes it's a quick lightning strike of physical violence. Other times it's steady rain of verbal abuse that soaks through your defenses over time.

Workplace violence includes but is not limited to verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological assaults. All of these can happen in healthcare settings.

This violence comes from different sources. Patients might lash out when they're in pain or scared. Families might blame you for bad news. Even colleagues can be sources of harassment.

## Types of Workplace Violence

According to research, nurses face verbal abuse and physical abuse the most, with verbal abuse being the most commonly reported. Here are the main types:

### Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse (58%) is the most common form of non-physical violence. This includes yelling, cursing, name-calling, and threats. Patients might call you names or blame you for their problems.

Verbal abuse can happen multiple times during a single shift. It might seem "normal" because it happens so often. But it's not okay.

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## Physical Violence

Physical violence includes hitting, kicking, punching, or throwing objects. Common types include being physically threatened (38.7 percent), and being pinched or scratched (37.3 percent).

Some patients might grab you or push you. Others might throw medical equipment or personal items. All of these actions can cause injury.

## Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment affects 12% of healthcare workers. This includes unwanted touching, sexual comments, or inappropriate requests.

Sexual harassment can come from patients, families, or colleagues. It's often dismissed as "part of the job." But it's illegal and harmful.

## Threats and Intimidation

Threats affect 33% of healthcare workers. These can be threats of violence, job loss, or other harm. Even if the person can't carry out the threat, it still causes fear.

Intimidation includes aggressive body language, following you, or making you feel unsafe. These behaviors create a hostile work environment.

## Who Commits Workplace Violence?

These acts were perpetrated by patients and their families, as well as colleagues and supervisors. Violence can come from anyone in the healthcare environment.

**Patients** might be confused, in pain, or scared. They might have mental health issues or substance abuse problems. But having problems doesn't excuse violence.

**Family members** might be stressed about their loved one's condition. They might take out their frustration on you. This is especially common during medical emergencies.

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**Colleagues** can also be sources of violence. This might include bullying, harassment, or discrimination. Workplace bullying is a serious problem in healthcare.

**Visitors** sometimes become violent when they're upset about hospital policies or visiting restrictions.

## Why Healthcare Workers Are Targets

Several factors make healthcare workers more likely to experience violence:

**High-stress situations** create tension. When people are sick, scared, or grieving, they might lash out. You're often the closest person to them.

**24/7 care** means you work all hours. Night shifts and weekends can be especially dangerous. There are fewer staff members around to help.

**Close contact** with patients puts you at risk. You have to get close to provide care. This makes it easier for someone to hurt you.

**Caring culture** sometimes means accepting abuse as "part of the job." This attitude needs to change. You deserve a safe workplace.

## The Impact on Your Health

Nurses, physicians, and allied health professionals cannot provide attentive care when they are afraid for their personal safety, distracted by disruptive patients or family members, or traumatized from prior attacks.

### Physical Effects

Violence can cause immediate physical injuries. Cuts, bruises, and broken bones are obvious. But there are other effects too.

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Workplace violence was strongly related to increased reports of musculoskeletal injuries, anxiety disorders and sleep disturbances. Your body stays tense when you're always on guard.

Headaches, stomach problems, and muscle pain are common. Your immune system weakens when you're stressed. You might get sick more often.

## **Emotional Effects**

Demoralization, depression, loss of self-esteem, feelings of incompetence, and post-traumatic stress are more likely to be observed by victims of workplace violence.

You might feel angry, sad, or numb. Some nurses feel guilty, thinking they did something wrong. Others feel helpless or powerless.

Fear is a common response. You might worry about going to work. Simple things like walking down a hallway can make you nervous.

## **Psychological Trauma**

Workplace violence has been associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms, increased stress levels, burnout, and fear or insecurity in the workplace.

You might have nightmares about violent incidents. Flashbacks can happen during normal activities. You might avoid certain patients or areas of the hospital.

Hypervigilance is common. This means you're always watching for danger. It's exhausting to be on high alert all the time.

## **Signs You're Affected by Workplace Violence**

Here are warning signs that violence is affecting your health:

**Sleep problems** like nightmares, insomnia, or waking up tired. You might have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

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**Anxiety symptoms** include racing heart, sweating, or feeling panicked. You might feel nervous about going to work or seeing certain patients.

**Avoiding situations** that remind you of violent incidents. You might avoid working certain shifts or in certain areas.

**Mood changes** like feeling sad, angry, or numb. You might lose interest in activities you used to enjoy.

**Physical symptoms** that don't have a medical cause. Headaches, stomach problems, or muscle tension that won't go away.

**Difficulty concentrating** at work or home. You might make more mistakes or have trouble focusing on tasks.

## Coping Strategies

Here are ways to protect yourself and cope with workplace violence:

### Immediate Safety

Trust your instincts. If something feels wrong, it probably is. Don't ignore warning signs of potential violence.

Position yourself near exits when possible. Don't let patients or families get between you and the door. Always have an escape route.

Use de-escalation techniques. Speak calmly and listen to concerns. Don't argue or take things personally.

Call for help immediately if you feel threatened. Don't try to handle violent situations alone. Use panic buttons or call security.

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## **Reporting Violence**

Report all incidents, even verbal abuse. Many nurses don't report "minor" incidents. But patterns of behavior are important to track.

Document everything. Write down what happened, when it happened, and who was involved. Include witness names if possible.

Take photos of injuries if they occur. This creates a record of what happened. It might be needed for workers' compensation or legal action.

Follow up on reports. Make sure your employer takes action. If they don't, consider contacting regulatory agencies.

## **Self-Care After Violence**

Seek medical attention for any injuries. Even minor injuries should be evaluated. Some injuries might not show symptoms immediately.

Talk to someone you trust. This might be a friend, family member, or counselor. Don't try to handle trauma alone.

Practice stress reduction techniques. Deep breathing, meditation, or exercise can help. Find activities that help you relax.

Consider professional counseling. Many employers offer employee assistance programs. These provide free, confidential counseling services.

## **Building Resilience**

Learn about workplace violence. Understanding the problem helps you recognize warning signs and protect yourself.

Develop safety skills. Take de-escalation training or self-defense classes. Practice what you would do in different situations.

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Build a support network. Connect with colleagues who understand what you're going through. Support groups can be helpful.

Take care of your overall health. Eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. Your body needs to be strong to handle stress.

## What Employers Should Do

Hospitals and health systems report that workplace violence and intimidation make it more difficult for staff to provide quality patient care. Employers have a responsibility to provide a safe workplace.

**Zero-tolerance policies** should be clearly stated and enforced. Violence should never be accepted as "part of the job."

**Security measures** like panic buttons, security cameras, and adequate lighting help protect staff. Security guards should be available when needed.

**Training programs** should teach all staff about workplace violence. This includes recognition, prevention, and response strategies.

**Adequate staffing** helps prevent violence. When units are understaffed, stress levels rise. This increases the risk of violent incidents.

**Support services** should be available after violent incidents. This includes counseling, time off, and help with reporting.

## Legal Protections

You have legal rights regarding workplace violence. Many states have specific laws protecting healthcare workers.

**Workers' compensation** may cover injuries from workplace violence. This includes medical bills and lost wages.



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**Criminal charges** can be filed against people who assault healthcare workers. Violence is not a medical symptom that excuses criminal behavior.

**Civil lawsuits** might be possible in some cases. This is especially true if your employer failed to provide a safe workplace.

Know your rights and don't be afraid to use them. You deserve protection under the law.

## Creating a Safety Culture

Change starts with individual actions. Here's how you can help create a safer workplace:

**Speak up** about violence and safety concerns. Don't stay silent about problems. Your voice matters.

**Support colleagues** who experience violence. Offer to be a witness or provide emotional support.

**Get involved** in workplace safety committees. Help develop policies and procedures to prevent violence.

**Educate others** about workplace violence. Share information with new employees and students.

## When to Seek Help

Get professional help if you experience:

- Thoughts of hurting yourself or others
- Panic attacks or severe anxiety
- Inability to sleep or eat normally
- Flashbacks or nightmares
- Avoiding work or calling in sick frequently
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope

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Don't wait until you're in crisis. Early intervention is more effective.

## Moving Forward

Workplace violence is a serious problem in healthcare. But you don't have to accept it as normal. You deserve a safe workplace where you can provide excellent patient care.

Remember that experiencing violence is not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. Violence is the responsibility of the person who chooses to be violent.

By taking steps to protect yourself and speaking up about problems, you can help create change. Your safety matters. Your wellbeing matters.

If you're struggling with the effects of workplace violence, reach out for help today. Talk to a supervisor, employee assistance program, or mental health professional. You don't have to face this alone.

Healthcare workers are essential to our communities. You deserve protection, respect, and support. Together, we can work to end workplace violence in healthcare.

Remember: violence is never part of the job. You have the right to a safe workplace. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Your safety matters. Your mental health matters. You matter.

#WorkplaceViolence #NurseSafety #HealthcareWorkerProtection