

## MLMIC Risk Management Tips

### Tip #7: Safely Caring for Obese Patients in the Office Practice Setting

**The Risk: Obesity is a serious health issue of epic proportion in the United States. Physicians' offices may not be well equipped to accommodate obese patients. Injuries can occur if appropriate equipment is not available to care for these patients. Further, bias or ambivalence by the healthcare team in treating obese patients can negatively affect patient care and lead to poor outcomes.**

#### Recommendations:

Providing a safe environment while optimizing sensitivity to the needs of the obese patient will enhance patient care and minimize your exposure to claims of negligence.

1. Examination rooms and waiting areas should contain appropriate and safe furnishings, such as large sturdy chairs, high sofas, benches, or loveseats that can accommodate obese patients.
2. Diagnostic and interventional equipment that can accommodate morbidly obese patients should be available, if regularly needed. This may include, but is not limited to:
  - Appropriate scales for patients who weigh more than 350 lbs.
  - Extra large adult-size blood pressure cuffs
  - Gowns to accommodate patients weighing more than 350 lbs.
  - Extra-long phlebotomy needles and tourniquets
  - Large examination tables
  - Toilets that can accommodate patients who weigh more than 300 lbs.
  - Sturdy grab bars in bathrooms
  - Sturdy step stools in examination rooms
3. The staff must be knowledgeable about the weight limits of their office equipment. Color coded labels can be used to discreetly identify weight

- limits. Further, the office staff must be educated and trained in the use of safe techniques for lifting and transferring obese patients.
4. While there are many medical complications of obesity, these patients are less likely to obtain preventative care and more likely to postpone or cancel appointments because of embarrassment and/or a feeling of bias on the part of healthcare providers due to their weight. Patient support and follow-up are important.
  5. Healthcare providers must address their own potential for weight bias. Recognize your pre-conceived ideas and attitudes regarding weight. Learn how to give appropriate feedback to patients to encourage healthful changes in behavior. Encourage patients to actively participate in their plan of care and set goals.
  6. Educate the staff about the needs of this patient population to enhance their ability to demonstrate understanding, respect, and sensitivity to these patients.