What Are Contractures?

Are Contractures Preventable?

What Should You Do?

By Missouri Attorney
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NURSING HOME CONTRACTURES: Nursing Home Neglect?

What Are Contractures?

Contractures have been defined as a condition of shortening and hardening of muscles, tendons or other tissue, often leading to the deformity and rigidity of joints. A common cause of contractures in nursing home residents is physical inactivity. When a nursing home resident is unable to move themselves they are physically inactive for long periods of time. With a prolonged lack of physical activity and the failure to regularly move a limb or joint through its full range of motion, muscle fibers begin to break down, muscles begin to shorten and joints begin to stiffen. When the muscles shorten, the affected limb beings to slowly pull toward the body and the joints become rigid. It is not uncommon to see nursing home residents with contracted hands, arms or legs, making it very difficult to give them the care they require. At its worst, residents will contract up to a “fetal position”.

Are Contractures Preventable?

Benjamin Franklin is famously credited with saying that “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” That is never more true that with joint contractures. Because contractures are extremely painful for the resident and very difficult to reverse, prevention is all the more important. Sadly, prevention of contractures is not a top priority at many nursing homes.
Contractures can be prevented in most nursing home residents if the prevention methods take place early, are done regularly and are done correctly. Here are three methods of prevention.

**EXERCISE**

Range of motion exercises are among the most important weapons in preventing contractures. Passive range of motion exercises (those which involve gently rotating the at risk body parts clockwise and counterclockwise) should be performed at least twice a day. For example, to prevent hand contractures, each finger should be gently stretched and rotated as far as possible. Likewise, to prevent contractures in the hips and knees, nurses should gently stretch the areas for 60 seconds or so to elongate the muscles and stretch the joints. This process may be mildly painful for the resident, but mild pain in prevention is much more acceptable than the severe pain that comes with full blown contractures.

When it comes to appropriate range of motion exercises, nurses and nurse aides should receive training so they understand the dangers of contractures, the simple exercises that can be done to prevent them and the short amount of time it takes to perform these exercises. Nurse aids can perform some of these exercises while bathing the individual or while changing their clothes. While physical and occupational therapists are more aware of the dangers of contractures and the exercises used to prevent them, it is not necessary that they be involved in the actual range of motion exercises.
**POSITIONING**

The position of nursing home residents is crucial. If a nursing home resident can sit in a chair, staff should make sure that the resident is properly seated with their feet resting comfortably on a flat surface such as a foot lift. Dangling feet can lead to “tip-toe” contractures. To prevent leg contractures, the resident should not be allowed to sleep with her legs in a bent or twisted position. Instead, pillows or cushions should be placed between the legs to help prevent contractures.

**SPLINTING**

Splinting devices can be very useful in helping preventing painful and debilitating contractures. Examples of such devices include special boots and wrist splints which can be used to help prevent fingers and toes from drawing up and stiffening. Knee and elbow braces are also an option to help keep those joints from stiffening in place, but will still allow the resident free range of motion.

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What is nursing home abuse and neglect? What should I look for when placing a loved one in a nursing home? How do I do if abuse or neglect happens to my loved one? How do I choose the right attorney for my case? What is my case worth? What actually happens in a lawsuit?

If you are concerned about a loved one in a nursing home or had a family member who died or was injured by neglect or abuse at a nursing home, this is the next book on your reading list. Request it for free at (314) 878-9797 download a free copy at [www.MissouriNursingHomeBook.com](http://www.MissouriNursingHomeBook.com)
STAFFING and TRAINING

Unfortunately, one of the main reasons (if not THE main reason) residents develop contractures despite the fact that they are preventable, has its roots in the nursing home budget. Staffing a nursing home is not an inexpensive task and every hour an employee works, is money taken straight from the financial bottom line. To perform the prevention exercises described in this paper requires staff members to spent some extra time with the residents. Sadly, far too many nursing homes are staffed so low that employees don’t have that extra time to spend stretching muscles and performing preventive measures.

Further, even though many of the exercises can be incorporated into the other tasks employees perform for the residents, most nursing homes fail to train their employees on how to do them. Too often, staff members have no extra time at all and have no idea that they could be helping prevent contractures while they perform other activities of daily living for the residents. Whether it is due to a lack of training, employees being overworked or even a disinterested employee, when a resident does not receive the necessary range of motion exercises and other therapy options to prevent contractures, the nursing home must shoulder the blame.

What Should You Do?

Many family members feel guilty when their loved ones don’t get the care and treatment the nursing home is required to provide. However, family members are entitled to rely on the promises made by the nursing home and one of those promises is that they facility will meet the needs of each resident. For residents at risk for contractures, those needs include exercising and stretching the residents
Muscles and joints. However, there are some things you as a concerned family member can do:

- Attend all care plan conferences regarding your loved one
- Insist that your loved one receive stretching exercises twice daily
- Insist that all necessary preventive devices are used
- Visit often and make sure that staff members are attentive to the needs of your loved one
- Be respectful, but insist that your loved one receive the care they require
- If necessary, complain with the Administrator of the facility
- If necessary, ask they physician to issue specific orders

**Conclusion**

I hope the information within this Guide has been helpful for you. If you have questions or concerns about contractures or other forms of abuse and neglect in nursing homes, pick up the phone and call the Terry Law Firm for a free consultation. You can reach us at (314) 878-9797.