

Keeping Your Elderly Relatives and Friends Safe

One area of concern unique to the care of frail, older persons who have bed rails installed on their beds is the risk that their heads, necks, chests, or other body parts will become entrapped in spaces between their mattresses and the bed rails or between spaces in the bed rails themselves. Because of their compromised physical or mental health, frail elderly persons may be unable to free themselves and are thus at risk of being strangled to death as a result of their entrapment.

Between 1985 and 2010, 493 people died when they became entrapped by the rail on their hospital, nursing home, or home health care bed and strangled to death. Another 141 people were injured—some sustaining amputations—as a result of the same problem. The vast majority of victims were frail, confused elderly patients. Their deaths and injuries were both senseless and preventable.

The danger of bed rail strangulation has been recognized for quite some time, but the effort to address the problem has moved slowly. In 1999, a "workgroup" formed with the guidance of the FDA, was created to study the issue.

As a result of the workgroup's review, the FDA has identified seven zones that pose a particular risk of entrapment and subsequent strangulation. Those seven areas are:

1. The space within the bed rail;
2. The space under the bed rail (between rail supports or next to a single rail support);
3. The space between the bed rail and the mattress;
4. The space between the bed rail, at the end of the bed rail;
5. The space between the two bed rails when two bed rails are placed on the same side of the bed with a space between the two bed rails;
6. The space between the end of the bed rail and the side edge of the head or foot board of the bed;
7. The space between the head or foot board and the mattress end (this area should be evaluated not only on beds with bed rails, but on any bed since the dangerous gaps are not created by the bed rail but by the mattress).

There are various measures that can be taken to keep our elderly relatives and friends safe from this danger and to reduce the risk of entrapment and strangulation by eliminating or reducing the size of these spaces.

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