

Protect the Elderly from Dangerous Bed Rails

What Are Bed Rails?

Bed rails are metal or plastic bars positioned along the side of a bed, also commonly known as side rails. The rails may extend the length of the bed or less, such as a quarter or half length. Some people use bed rails to help pull themselves up or turn in bed, or, to get out of bed. Others may use a bed rail thinking it will prevent an older adult from falling out of bed or keep an individual with dementia from getting out of bed and wandering. Some bed rails are attached to the bed as part of a “bed system.” Bed rails that are part of a bed system are found on hospital beds, in most nursing homes and in medical supply companies that rent hospital beds for use at home. There are also portable bed rails that can be purchased by consumers directly and attached to a bed.

Why Are Bed Rails Dangerous for Elders?

Bed rails are frequently used in homes or long-term care facilities because they are believed to keep people safe. In reality, bed rails can be extremely harmful. Bed rails can cause:

Strangulation or asphyxiation: Older adults can get trapped in the gap between the bed rail and the mattress. The individual can roll into that gap and be too weak, frail or confused to change position. The mattress may press against the elder’s chest, preventing the individual from breathing. This can quickly result in death. Elders can also get trapped between the rails and suffocate.

Severe Injury: When individuals who are confused or have dementia want to get out of bed and bed rails block their way, they frequently try to climb over the rails. This can lead to a fall, hitting their heads, and a serious injury. Cuts, abrasions and bruises can also result when an older adult becomes entrapped.

Thousands of individuals have been hurt or killed by bed rails.

Data from Consumer Product Safety Commission Reports:

- 2003 (Jan) – 2012 (Sep): 155 deaths due to bed rails
- 2003 – 2011: Almost 37,000 bed rail-related injuries treated at hospital emergency rooms

Data from Food and Drug Administration Reports:

- 1985 – 2009 (Jan): 480 deaths, 138 nonfatal injuries due to bed rails

What Can Be Done to Protect the Elderly?

Call upon the Food and Drug Administration and the Consumer Product Safety Commission to:

Create safety standards. Both the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) have received hundreds of reports of injuries and deaths related to bed rails, yet **there are no mandatory standards for adult bed rails.**

Recall dangerous devices. Bed rails that have injured or killed older adults remain on the market. These bed rails continue to cause harm or death, yet no action is taken. The FDA and CPSC must exercise their product recall authority in order to remove from the market dangerous bed rails that have shown risks of entrapment or asphyxiation or other failures.

Resolve jurisdiction issues. The FDA and the CPSC disagree about which agency has authority over the different types of bed rails. The result is little to no action at all. These agencies must work together to resolve any jurisdictional issues so vulnerable older adults will be protected.

Use their authority to take action. Both agencies can develop standards and recall dangerous products, but little to nothing has been done.

Alternatives to Bed Rails

There are safer ways to reduce the risk of injury from falls. These include:

- Lowering the bed as near to the floor as possible. An adjustable height bed can go very low to the floor for sleeping and be raised for transfers and care.
- Placing mats by the side of the bed to cushion any fall that might occur.
- Using a secured vertical pole to assist in getting in and out of bed.
- Using a bed trapeze to help reposition while in bed and to get in and out of bed.

The Consumer Voice urges the FDA and the CPSC to:

- **Create minimum safety standards for all adult bed rails**
- **Recall unsafe adult bed rails**
- **Resolve jurisdictional issues to protect vulnerable, at-risk older adults**

For more information on this issue, please visit: <http://theconsumervoice.org/issues/other-issues-and-resources/dangers-of-bed-rails>