

**CITY OF OCONOMOWOC POLICE DEPARTMENT  
POLICIES & PROCEDURES**

DATE: January 27, 2021

HISTORY: March 30, 1998

SUBJECT: Preventing Positional Asphyxia

POLICY NUMBER: 98-017

**I. PURPOSE**

To help officers recognize factors contributing to this phenomenon and, therefore, enable them to respond in a way that will ensure the subject's safety and minimize risk of death.

**II. DEFINITION**

Positional Asphyxia:

Death because of body position that interferes with one's ability to breathe as it occurs within a confrontational situation involving law enforcement officers.

**III. BASIC PHYSIOLOGY OF A STRUGGLE**

- A. A person lying on their stomach has trouble breathing when pressure is applied to their back (not allowing the chest to fully expand). Essential.
- B. A suspect is restrained in a face-down position and breathing may become labored.
- C. Weight is applied to the person's back. The more weight, the more severe the degree of compression. The individual experiences increased difficulty breathing.
- D. The natural reaction to oxygen deficiency is to struggle more violently.
- E. The officer applies more compression to subdue the individual.

**IV. FACTORS FOUND TO PRECIPITATE POSITIONAL ASPHYXIA**

- A. Cocaine-induced bizarre or frenzied behavior:  
When occurring while confined by restraints, cocaine-induced excited delirium (an acute mental disorder characterized by impaired thinking, disorientation, visual hallucinations, and illusions) may increase a subject's susceptibility to sudden death by affecting an increase of the heart rate to a critical level.
- B. Drugs and/or alcohol intoxication:  
Drug and acute alcohol intoxication are a major risk factor because they reduce respiratory drive, and subjects may not realize they are suffocating.
- C. Violent struggle extreme enough to require officers to employ some type of restraint technique:  
Subjects who have engaged in extreme violent activities may be more vulnerable to subsequent respiratory muscle failure.
- D. Unresponsiveness of subject during or immediately after a struggle:  
Such unresponsive behavior may suggest cardiopulmonary arrest and the need for immediate medical attention.

## **V. PREDISPOSING FACTORS TO POSITIONAL ASPHYXIA**

- A. Obesity.
- B. Alcohol and high drug use.
- C. An enlarged heart (renders an individual more susceptible to a cardiac arrhythmia under conditions of low blood oxygen and stress).
- D. Asthma.
- E. Psychotic state.
- F. Recent head injury.
- G. Prolonged restraint.
- H. Presence of excited delirium.
- I. High level of anxiety.

## **VI. CARE GUIDELINES FOR SUBDUED SUBJECTS**

- A. When the suspect is handcuffed, get them off their stomach. Turn them onto their side or place them in a sitting position.
- B. If subject continues to struggle, do not sit on their back. Hold their legs down or wrap their legs with a strap.
- C. **NEVER** tie the handcuffs to a leg or ankle restraint (Hog Tying). Prisoners will **NEVER** be transported in a "hogtied" position.
- D. Do not lay the person on their stomach during transport. Instead, place them in a seated position.
- E. Ask the subject if they have used drugs recently or suffer from any cardiac or respiratory diseases or conditions such as asthma, bronchitis, or emphysema.
- F. Monitor subject carefully and obtain medical treatment if needed.
- G. Obtain medical care upon subject's request.
- H. If the subject is turned over to a detention facility inform the facility custodians of any preexisting medical conditions or that the subject requested or needed medical treatment because of respiratory difficulty or because they became unconscious.
- I. You should always monitor the subject's vital signs using the ABC Method:
  - 1) Airway – ensure the path is free of obstruction
  - 2) Breathing – ensure air flows freely to and from the lungs
  - 3) Circulation – ensure heartbeat and pulse are present

**VII. WAUKESHA COUNTY JAIL POLICY**

- A. All prisoners who have been restrained in such a manner as to present a risk of positional asphyxia must be medically cleared by a doctor prior to being accepted into the Waukesha County Jail.
- B. Clearance by a medical doctor should occur anytime the position of a restrained prisoner interferes with the normal breathing process.
- C. It will be the responsibility of the transporting officer to notify jail personnel that the prisoner was restrained in a positional asphyxia position.

**V. EXCEPTIONS TO THIS POLICY MAY BE AUTHORIZED ONLY BY THE CHIEF OF POLICE**

This policy is effective immediately  
and will supersede any directives or understandings in conflict