
How did this get started?

In 2005, a hospital in Pennsylvania submitted a report to the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Reporting System describing an event in which clinicians nearly failed to rescue a patient who had a cardiopulmonary arrest because the patient had been incorrectly designated as do-not-resuscitate.

The source of confusion was a nurse who incorrectly had placed a yellow wristband on the patient. In that hospital, a yellow wristband signified the patient should not be resuscitated. In a nearby hospital where the nurse also worked, yellow signified “restricted extremity,” meaning that this arm is not to be used for drawing blood or obtaining intravenous access. Fortunately, another clinician identified the mistake and the patient was resuscitated. However, this “near miss” highlights a potential source of error and an opportunity to improve patient safety by re-evaluating the use of color-coded patient alert wristbands.

Tennessee hospitals acknowledge and thank this Pennsylvania hospital for its transparency and disclosure of this event. It could have happened anywhere, and it has served as a “wake-up” call to many.

Tennessee has joined the effort.

As a result of the Pennsylvania *Patient Safety Advisory* reporting that the use of color-coded patient alert wristbands could, if not done uniformly, create unnecessary risk, many states began to work toward standardization in acute care hospitals.

In 2009, the Tennessee Hospital Association’s Tennessee Center for Patient Safety approved a statewide initiative to bring this patient safety effort to Tennessee. Tennessee joins nearly 30 states implementing standardized wristband colors for allergies, falls and do-not-resuscitate.

Standardizing the colors of alert wristbands across the state and the nation helps staff members do their jobs better and safer. Nurses and others no longer have to remember colors or symbols unique to a specific hospital. They can learn a single set of rules that will apply in most Tennessee hospitals.

- Red means allergy alert.
- Yellow means fall risk.
- Purple means do-not-resuscitate.

Color-Coded Wristband Standardization Project in Tennessee

Hospital Implementation Program



A guide for clinical and non-clinical staff

Color-Coded Patient Alert Wristbands: A Statewide Patient Safety Initiative

In 2008, surveys were sent to Tennessee hospitals asking questions related to color-coded patient alert wristbands. The results showed seven different colors/methods were being used in Tennessee to convey do-not-resuscitate; seven different colors/methods conveyed fall risk; and five conveyed allergy.

The risk was apparent and the answer is this project.

Confusion can result when the same colors are used for different alerts. A standard-color alert wristband communicates a quick warning to everyone.

Educating patients and families is important.

How something is said is just as important as *what* is said. It also is important to have a consistent message to help patients/families remember what is said and instill a sense of confidence in the healthcare system since all staff members deliver the same information.

The following model “script” should be used to deliver consistent information to patients and families about the standardized color-coded patient alert wristband program.

Script

What is a color-coded patient alert wristband?

Color-coded patient alert wristbands are used in hospitals to quickly communicate a certain health-care status or condition that a patient may have. The color-coded wristband is a visual “alert” for all staff members, and helps every staff member provide the best care possible.

What do the different colors mean?

This hospital uses three different color-coded patient alert wristbands. They are commonly used in Tennessee, as well as in hospitals in multiple other states.

Red means allergy alert.

Patients should inform caregivers about an allergy to anything— food, medicine, latex, dust, grass, pet hair, etc. The red wristband reminds caregivers to check the allergy before delivering food, medicine or other aspects of care. This can be very important to avoid unpleasant or serious reactions.

Yellow means a risk to falls.

The hospital wants to prevent falls at all times. Nurses continuously assess patients to determine if they need extra attention to prevent a fall. Sometimes, a person may become weakened due to illness or because of a recent surgery. When a patient has this color-coded alert wristband, the nurse is indicating this patient needs to be assisted when walking to avoid a possible fall.

Purple means the physician has written a do-not-resuscitate order.

When patients have expressed an end-of-life wish, the hospital and its caregivers want to honor it.

Risk-Reduction Strategies Staff Should Know

Color-Coded Patient Alert Wristbands/ Risk-Reduction Strategies Quick Reference Card

1. Use wristbands with the alert message pre-printed (such as DNR).
 2. Remove any “social cause” colored wristbands (such as LIVESTRONG).
 3. Remove wristbands that have been applied by another facility, except for emergency identification bands.
 4. Initiate banding upon admission, changes in condition or receipt of information during the hospital stay.
 5. Educate patients and family members regarding the wristbands.
 6. Coordinate chart/white board/care plan/door signage information/stickers with same color coding.
 7. Educate staff to verify color-coded patient alert wristbands upon assessment and during hand-offs of care and facility transfer communication.
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