

# Positional asphyxia

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**Positional asphyxia**, is also known as **postural asphyxia**, is a form of [asphyxia](#) which occurs when someone's [position](#) prevents them from [breathing](#) adequately. A small but significant number of people die suddenly and without apparent reason during restraint by [police](#), [prison](#) (corrections) officers and [health care](#) staff.<sup>[1]</sup> Positional asphyxia may be a factor in some of these deaths.

- Positional asphyxia is a potential danger of some physical restraint techniques,
- People may die from positional asphyxia by simply getting themselves into a breathing-restricted position they cannot get out of, either through carelessness or as a consequence of another [accident](#).

Research has suggested that restraining a person in a face down position is likely to cause greater restriction of breathing than restraining a person face up.<sup>[2]</sup> Many law enforcement and health personnel are now taught to avoid restraining people face down or to do so only for a very short period of time.<sup>[1]</sup> Risk factors which may increase the chance of death include obesity, prior cardiac or respiratory problems, and the use of illicit drugs such as cocaine.<sup>[3]</sup> Almost all subjects who have died during restraint have engaged in extreme levels of physical resistance against the restraint for a prolonged period of time.<sup>[3]</sup> Other issues in the way the subject is restrained can also increase the risk of death, for example kneeling or otherwise placing weight on the subject and particularly any type of restraint hold around the subject's neck. Research measuring the effect of restraint positions on lung function suggests that restraint which involves bending the restrained person or placing body weight on them, has more effect on their breathing than face down positioning alone <sup>[4]</sup>

There is a degree of controversy amongst researchers regarding the extent to which restraint positions restrict breathing. Some researchers report that when they conducted laboratory studies of the effects of restraint on breathing and oxygen levels, the effect was limited.<sup>[5]</sup> Other researchers point out that deaths in real life situations occur after [prolonged, violent resistance](#) which has not been studied in laboratory simulations.<sup>[6]</sup>

Positional asphyxia may also occur as a result of accident or illness. Olympic track athlete [Florence Griffith-Joyner](#)<sup>[7]</sup> and ex-Major League Baseball player [John Marzano](#)<sup>[8]</sup> both died due to positional asphyxia, the former following an epileptic seizure and the latter following a fall down a flight of stairs.

## **[edit]** References

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8. ^ [Medical examiner says a fall killed John Marzano | Philadelphia Inquirer | 07/18/2008](#)

## **[edit]** External links

- <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/1996/may966.txt>
- <http://www.cpsc.gov/businfo/frnotices/fr01/bedrail.html>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/face/in-house/full8723.html>

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