When to Use Root Cause Analysis

Root cause analysis (RCA) is a problem-solving method or process for investigating an incident, concern, failure, or an actual or potential problem. RCA should be considered for "close calls" or "near misses" that have the potential for serious or negative outcome. Events that are chronic, recurring, involving communication breakdown, and are systemic in nature are best for this type of in-depth problem solving. Infection spreading and directed plan of correction (DPOC) are adverse events for which RCA reveals vital information to correct or strengthen the involved process. The RCA process is performed by a team to identify breakdowns in processes and systems that contributed to the event and how to prevent them from recurring. Events that can be investigated using the RCA process can be identified from many sources, such as:

- Incident reports
- Any feedback or any type of survey
- An unexpected occurrence that led to individual or staff harm
- A repeating problem

Root cause analysis can be used in many situations, below are a few situations and examples:

Type of Situation	Example(s)
An adverse or sentinel event is an unexpected occurrence involving serious injury or death of an individual	A COVID-19 outbreak or an individual falls which results in a serious head injury requiring hospitalization
Near miss, unacceptable risk or chronic failure	The wrong medication dose is found in the medication cart
Recurring complaints	A family member complains that it took 30 minutes for his mother's call light to be answered. Another family member reports that staff didn't appear for 15 minutes after turning on the call light
Repeating event	75% of all falls occur between 6 and 8 PM
Any time a performance gap is identified	A plan of care was not followed or DPOC (Directed Plan of Correction) and/or any type of infection outbreak

RCA also is not necessary for every concern, incident or problem that arises. Some situations can be managed and resolved quickly such as:

- If it is unlikely to recur based on unique circumstances
- If negative consequences may be minor or non-existent
- If there is no pattern of previous similar events or trends

It's also important to understand that RCA is not intended to find "who is at fault". Problem solving that is focused on finding and blaming an individual is ineffective. RCA is focused on what systems led individuals to make the choices they did, and changing the systems to change behavior.