



Caution!
Wet Floor

SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS:

What employers need
to know to mitigate
employee risk in
the workplace

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Slips, Trips and Falls: What employers need to know to mitigate employee risk in the workplace

Whether a workplace is inherently hazardous, like in an industrial setting, or seemingly safe, like an office space, slips, trips and falls can happen in nearly any profession. Although it's important for employees to be smart and cautious while working, it often falls on employers to put safety guidelines and responsible protocols in place to make the workplace safe and prevent the likelihood of these avoidable injuries.

"Slips can be caused by spilled or improperly cleaned liquids on a floor, as well as dry materials like woodchips, sawdust or metal shavings."

Fall-related workplace injuries lead to millions of emergency room visits each year and result in about \$70 billion spent annually in the U.S. on workers' compensation and medical care for victims. In addition to monetary costs, people injured by these avoidable accidents miss an average of 35 days of work a year each. Slips, trips and falls hurt productivity, incur high costs and, worst of all, result in serious and sometimes long-term injuries for many employees.

Identify dangers

Before employers take efforts to prevent these common injuries, it's important to understand the most frequent causes of trips, slips and falls. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, each has a specific meaning and may be more likely in certain businesses than others.

Trips are usually the result of a foot getting caught on something. Trips are particularly common in industrial or construction work where walkways are often obstructed and power tools are used. Cords, cable and ropes can cause trips because they're easily unseen. Debris, boxes, clutter and anything else out of place can be also dangers. In non-industrial settings, rugs, unmarked steps and other uneven surfaces can also trip employees.

With slips, the issue isn't obstructed pathways, but rather a slick surface that results in a loss of friction and traction with footwear. Slips can be caused by spilled or improperly cleaned liquids on a floor, as well as dry materials like woodchips, sawdust or metal shavings. People wearing inappropriate or worn down work shoes also increase their likelihood of slipping.

Falling may be the most all-encompassing term and can be caused by a number of environmental factors in a variety of professions. Stairs and poor lighting are some of the most common causes of workplace falls, when people misjudge depth or distance. Poor safety protocols for high-height work on equipment, like ladders, can also lead to serious fall-related injuries.

Reduce the likelihood of injury

Once employers are able to identify areas where slips, trips and falls could potentially occur or have happened in the past, it's important to put practices into place that make these surfaces, areas or obstacles safe for every employee. This can be achieved with documented policies and procedures that managers and employees are held accountable for. A safe environment is more likely to occur within an organization that commits to a culture of safety. Consider having someone at each facility or department take on the role of "safety ambassador" or safety coordinator to ensure your team is following the preventative procedures to keep the workplace safe.

Employers' best chances of ensuring employee safety and creating a hazard-free work environment is to keep work areas clean, to properly mark and install structures, to encourage the use of slip-resistant footwear on the job, and to take advantage of slip-resistant mats and other general precautions. With these efforts, any employer can have the peace of mind that he or she has reduced the chances of an employee becoming injured.

Maintain a clean and sanitary work atmosphere

The first step to keeping a clean workspace is to eliminate obstructions, cords and debris from the work area. Simply put, anything that can potentially interfere with an employee's ability to walk easily or work safely needs to go.

Oregon's not-for-profit, state-chartered workers' compensation company, the SAIF Corporation, advised businesses to put effort into clearly marking walkways. Whether with tape on the warehouse floor or shelving in a kitchen, these signs will let people know that this is an area that can't be obstructed by boxes, cords or other storage and debris.



Employers should discuss the very real impacts of slips, trips and falls in the workplace with employees. These educational talks can be used as a basis for creating a culture of cleanliness, especially in high traffic areas.

Another aspect of maintaining a clutter-free work environment is to clean frequently. Regardless of an employee's title, employers should enforce that cleaning the workspace is part of the job. The University of Kansas advised that businesses adopt a "self-inspection"

program, in which employers heighten employee vigilance to the causes of slips, trips and falls to place an emphasis on potential dangers. From picking up after one's self to sweeping the floor, good housekeeping practices can go a long way to preventing injury.

"Keeping work spaces well-lit will help employees better see where they're walking, to avoid a trip or fall. This may also illuminate any spills or obstructions that could lead to a spill or fall."

Cleaning may be most important when a liquid is spilled on the ground. Whether oil at an automotive repair shop, sawdust at a millworks or tomato sauce in a cafeteria kitchen, quick and proper cleanup is critical to keeping a workspace safe. The U.K.'s Health and Safety Executive advised that employees react immediately to spills, but make sure that they don't inadvertently make the surface more dangerous during the cleanup process. They should also ensure that they're using the right substances and tools for the specific surface and that other employees are excluded or made aware of the danger until the area is clear. Employers can install proper protocols, provide cleaning solutions and post safety signage. Spill education should also be provided.

In addition to spills, leaks, plumbing issues and broken machinery all pose serious trouble. These problems can create similarly slippery situations, but their additional danger comes from the element of surprise. While people are often aware when they spill a substance and can act quickly to clean it, leaks may go unnoticed until after a slip occurs.

Whether it's vegetable oil leaking from a kitchen appliance or water spraying the floor from a refrigerator at a grocery store, frequent maintenance and proper usage of machinery is critical to workplace safety.

Use signs, labels and safe structures

Many injuries from slips, trips and falls may simply be due to insufficient markings. Whether it's a step up from the loading dock to the warehouse or a sneaky curb in the parking lot, bright, informative markings and signage can help effectively combat accidental tripping.

Although marking these areas is important, sometimes employers should take the effort to eliminate the risk instead. Uneven surfaces such as potholes or gaps between floors should be fixed immediately.

Other permanent dangers, like staircases, can be improved with railings or hand holds. Lighting fixtures also play a critical role in preventing costly falls. Keeping work spaces well-lit will help employees better see where they're walking, to avoid a trip or fall. This may also illuminate any spills or obstructions that could lead to a spill or fall.

Labels aren't only important for permanent dangers; it's also critical to mark areas where spills or cleaning has recently occurred. This can let employees avoid the wet space and a painful slip. In climates where winter causes ice, it's important to put up signage in the most dangerous areas, as well as to salt and sand walkways and parking lots.

Employ a safe footwear policy

One of the smartest ways to prevent slips and falls is to ensure employees are wearing slip-resistant footwear. Even better, they should be wearing shoes that provide truly effective slip resistance, which can be measured by the resulting coefficient of friction the shoe tread produces on a Brungraber Mark II Slip Tester according to ASTM Standard F1677. Slip-resistant footwear brands that are serious about safety and the effectiveness of their product should offer their slip resistance test results.

“Many businesses use mats in transitional areas and kitchens to cut down on the impact dirt, water and sand will have on the surrounding surface.”

Employers can put significant effort into improving work surfaces and installing safety protocols, but if employees aren’t wearing the proper work shoes, an injury may be inevitable. Some surfaces encountered in foodservice, healthcare, industrial and other workplace environments are simply too slick for non-slip-resistant footwear to maintain traction. Jim Nusser, a senior safety management consultant for SAIF Corp, told Safety+Health magazine that too many employers overlook the undeniable benefits of safe footwear.

“A lot of fast-food places have gone to issuing shoes for employees because they know how critical that is,” Nusser told the magazine, which is published by the National Safety Council Congress & Expo.

It’s not just fast food—almost any employee can benefit from footwear that improves friction, from hotel employees and nurses to restaurant workers and grocers.

Employers can encourage proper footwear in a variety of ways. Some employers may simply talk to employees about the risks of wearing slippery footwear, while many businesses turn toward payroll deduction programs or buying footwear directly to ensure that every employee can have the proper slip-resistant shoes for the job. The SAIF Corporation called safe footwear a “critical component” of preventing injuries due to slips, trips and falls.

Take advantage of safety mats and other precautions

Many businesses use mats in transitional areas and kitchens to cut down on the impact dirt, water and sand will have on the surrounding surface. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised businesses use large mats that can help absorb these potentially slip-causing substances.

However, mats can be hazards themselves in many situations. The best way to combat the tripping and slipping dangers that mats can pose is to use slip-resistant mats. Whether on a wet kitchen floor, a heavily trafficked hotel lobby or an industrial setting, a slip-resistant mat can provide a safe walking surface where employees can feel secure.

It's also important to use cord covers and proper markers when a cable, cord or other obstruction crosses a walking path. Ineffective gutters can create slippery situations on outdoor walkways.

In addition to the workspace, special efforts should be taken in the bathrooms, where surfaces are often wet or slippery. Handles and frequent maintenance checks can be invaluable in bathrooms and showers on company property.

Prevent these avoidable injuries

Although slips, trips and falls can carry serious consequences for their victims, they're often avoidable. Employers have a significant amount of power when it comes to improving worker safety. By installing slip-resistant mats, safety footwear regulations, proper labeling of hazards, safety structures, cleanliness protocols and a general attitude shift toward caution and safety in the face of slips, trips and falls, employers can help reduce the risk of these accidents.

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