



Take a Surefooted Approach Toward Slips, Trips and Falls

A slapstick comedian slips on a banana peel and the audience laughs. A schoolchild falls as he walks to the blackboard and another student asks, "Have a good trip?" The jokes are familiar, but slips are no laughing matter. They take a heavy toll in the number of workplace injuries and lost workdays. Falls to the same level are one of the most common causes of injuries on the job, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Investigate slips

The incidence of slips, trips and falls at work may be even higher than the numbers show. Workers do not report many of the incidents because they are minor and make them appear clumsy, which is a mistake. To reduce slips, trips and falls, managers should stress the seriousness of all incidents and have employees inform them of even the most harmless ones. Minor incidents that are reported may be clues to troublesome areas needing repairs and may actually help prevent a major incident from occurring.

Investigations should focus on the following areas, where most incidents occur:

- Doorways and other transitional areas
- Ramps
- Cluttered hallways
- Areas with heavy traffic
- Uneven surfaces
- Any area prone to wetness or spills

As long as people move spills will occur, but a variety of products can reduce the chances that they will cause a fall. Some of the most popular products to reduce the risk of falls are slip-resistant floors, mats and footwear. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's guidelines on walking and working surfaces call for slip-resistant floor surfaces in work areas that are generally slippery because of wet, oily or dirty operations. OSHA also says workers should wear slip-resistant footwear to reduce slipping hazards.

Pick the right floor

The appropriate floor covering depends on its use. Here are some questions to consider when choosing an appropriate floor:

- What kinds of spills are likely?
- What are the sanitary requirements?
- Is noise a concern?
- Will the area have heavy traffic?
- What equipment must the floor hold?
- How will the floor be cleaned?
- Are aesthetic effects a concern?

Various non-skid floor coatings that increase traction also are available. Carpets provide good traction but can cause falls if they are worn or do not fit tightly. Make sure rug and runner edges are securely bound and beveled with rubber or plastic to avoid catching on shoes or boots.

Slip-resistant mats provide added protection in spots where spills are likely, such as in areas with heavy traffic or where customers and employees may track in water and dirt. Typical places for mats are at entrances to hotels and restaurants, around equipment that sprays water, in service aisles of restaurants, in produce sections of grocery stores and on bathroom floors.

Some mats are made to direct water, grease and other spills away from the walking surface. An added benefit of mats is they can relieve back and leg strain.

Choose shoes made to grip

Safety experts recommend footwear with slip-resistant soles for people who work in businesses where surfaces are wet or greasy or employees move rapidly from one type of floor to another. Employees prefer footwear that's comfortable, stylish and durable.

In a pilot study, Friendly Ice Cream Corp. in Wilbraham, Mass. required employees at eight of its restaurants to wear slip-resistant shoes during the busy summer seasons. In the same period the previous year, those restaurants had seven slip-and-fall injuries. During the test, only one injury occurred, and that was to an employee who did not wear the appropriate shoes.

Take control with training

Environmental changes alone cannot protect employees and guests. To further reduce the risk of falls, employees should check that aisles are clear, floors are clean, signs are present to warn people of slippery areas, and that guests get the assistance they need.

Managers should stress these safety reminders:

- If you drop it, pick it up
- If you spill it, wipe it up
- Go where you are looking, and look where you are going

Not all falls occur because of wet floors, cluttered aisles or missed steps. There are behavioral changes that can be learned to reduce the risk of falls or minimize their impact such as:

- Walking techniques that use feet as probes
- How to balance properly by keeping the head up and maintaining the body's natural center of gravity
- Ways to get the feet underneath quickly to recover balance after an initial slip
- How to protect the most vulnerable parts of the body, such as the head and spine, if you do fall

Whether companies implement behavioral, environmental or a combination of measures to reduce slips, trips and falls, their incident rates usually decline.

