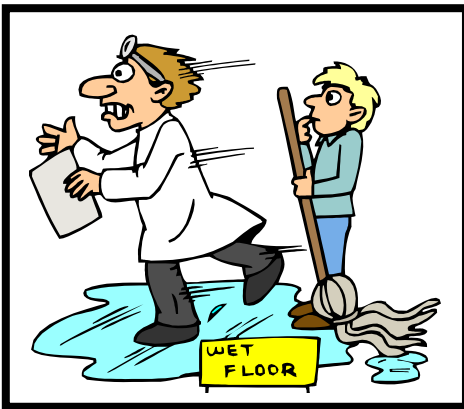


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Slip, Trip, and Fall Prevention



Simply walking should not be a hazardous activity, yet many employees suffer severe injuries as a result of slips, trips, and falls. These include head injuries, back injuries, lacerations, fractures, pulled muscles, and deep contusions. Slips, trips, and falls result in disabling workplace injuries that are the cause of more than 30 percent of all workers' compensation claims.¹ Poor walking surfaces are the major contributor to workplace slips, trips, and falls, although inappropriate footwear is also a significant factor in these events. Good housekeeping and maintenance practices are the most important safeguards to preventing slips, trips, and falls in the healthcare environment.

Prevention strategies start with identifying the cause of slips, trips, and falls. Traditional safety inspections are essential to identifying slip, trip, and fall hazards. Analysis of the claims history of slips, trips, and falls will provide indications of sources and locations of such hazards. Once such factors regarding these events have been identified, walking and work areas should be modified to control hazardous exposures. In some instances, work practices may have to be modified and the type of footwear may have to be regulated. The final part of the prevention strategy is employee awareness education.

Although each of us takes numerous steps daily, very few of these steps are viewed with any degree of significant consideration. Controlling slip, trip, and fall hazards requires everyone's participation. Management must commit to actions that implement engineering and work practice controls; supervisors and managers should conduct inspections and monitor work practices to ensure that proper safety measures are being taken; and employees must use their training to eliminate potentially hazardous practices that could result in a slip, trip, and fall event.

The following are some examples of safe practices that all of us can take to prevent slips, trips, and falls:

Take the Appropriate Time

Slips, trips, and falls can occur when someone is distracted and in a hurry. We often take short cuts and fail to pay attention to what we are doing. We might choose to go over an obstacle rather than take "the long way around" to reach a destination. We sometimes choose unsafe behaviors to save time. Thinking ahead, walking sure-footedly, and avoiding potentially hazardous shortcuts are the smart choices.

Watch Your Step

Pay attention to where you are walking. Consider the type of surface, inclines, and any obstacles in your path. Yield to potential hazards or choose a safer alternative. Avoid routes not designated for foot traffic and be aware of unstable, shaky, or slippery surfaces.

Wear Proper Footwear

Your feet are your foundation and need a good support structure. The shoes we wear can play a big part in preventing falls. The slickness of the soles and the types of heels worn need to be evaluated if slips, trips, and falls are to be prevented. In areas where slips have occurred, employees should wear non-skid, slip resistant soles on their shoes (which should be low-heeled, as high-heeled shoes have less surface contact offering less friction). Shoes should be kept free of grease and oil. Appropriate shoe coverings should be used in those areas where snow or ice could accumulate (e.g., walk-in freezers), or when employees must walk on the premises in winter weather. Yes, proper footwear can be considered personal protective equipment (PPE)!

Walk Safely

It is not always possible to avoid walking on wet or slippery surfaces, so it is important to take appropriate precautions when one must walk on such surfaces. Do not run, jump, or slide. Instead, take slow, short steps with toes pointed slightly outwards for a stronger supportive stance. For additional balance, keep your hands at your sides and not in your pockets. Additionally, some housekeeping routines can cause a build-up of detergent or floor finish, which can become a slip hazard. Particular care must be exercised at building entrances, in rest rooms, and in cafeterias where foreign materials may be present on floor surfaces. Few slips occur on carpeted floors; however, trips are likely if exposed rug edges curl. When one walks from a carpeted surface onto a different floor surface, it is necessary to change gait or step; otherwise, a slip may occur. One should be alert to walking surface differences such as variations in height, unevenness, and surface condition changes. A slip, trip, and fall can be avoided if an individual's body weight, or center of gravity, is maintained directly over his/her feet.



Keep Floors Clean, Clear, and Dry

Slippery surfaces are often the result of our careless acts: spilled beverages from uncovered drinking containers on the floor, oil leaks that haven't been cleaned up, and highly waxed floors, to name a few. Freshly polished/waxed floors can be very slick and hazardous even if one is observant. Some floor finishes can make floors more slippery, particularly if liquids are present on such surfaces.

Floor maintenance must consider potential foot traffic by cleaning only one side of the corridor at a time, or cleaning during off-hours so that employees always have access to a dry surface to walk on. When walking, observe wet floor signs and floor dryer fans for potential slip, trip, and fall hazards. Environmental services staff should remove wet floor signage when a floor is dry. All staff should clean up spills immediately (do not wait for environmental staff). Materials for cleanup must be easily accessible near potential sources of spills. If it is suspected that the spill contains blood or body fluids, know where to find and use the appropriate spill kit and implement standard precautions to prevent bloodborne pathogen exposure. Redirect fluid drains to prevent drainage onto walkways. Placing liquid absorbing mats at building entrances and wet process areas will prevent the tracking of liquid. For outdoor areas, greasy spots should be covered with sand or an appropriate absorbent. During snow and freezing rain, sand and/or non-slip de-icers should be used wherever there is foot/pedestrian traffic. Specific safety policies should be developed when indicated as a result of a job hazard analysis (e.g., paraffin spill cleanup in the Histology Laboratory).

Use Anti-Slip Coating

Areas that are usually wet due to the nature of operations and services (e.g., Dietary, Rehabilitation, etc.) should be coated with anti-slip coating. The surface should be rough enough to prevent liquid from hydroplaning between floor and footwear. Floor surfaces should meet the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety guidelines.²

Brighten the Environment

Proper lighting will help to ensure that employees can see hazards. Inadequate lighting can camouflage obstacles, thus causing a slip, trip, and fall event. Window coverings should be open, burned out light bulbs replaced, and lighting should be sufficient to adequately light all walking surfaces. Adequate lighting should be available and activated when entering a darkened area for even a short duration of time. Flashlights or similar light sources should be provided when entering areas where there is no lighting.



Clean up Clutter on and above Walking Surfaces

All walkways should be kept clear of obstructions. Items should not be left on the floor – not even for a moment. Power cords on environmental services/maintenance equipment should not be stretched in front of doorways or around corners, as this presents a significant tripping hazard. All walkways should be maintained for a distance of at least three feet in width to eliminate the need to turn sideways when walking. If it is necessary to store equipment in a hallway for easy access, all items should be kept against one designated wall to maintain open aisles for foot traffic and to allow for emergency evacuation, if necessary. Foot traffic in the aisles of office areas should not be exposed to open desk drawers (it is sometimes very difficult to see open lower drawers) or open file cabinet drawers.

Stair Safety

Steep and narrow steps can be hazardous, as it is easy to lose one's footing in such circumstances. It is imperative that one walks slowly and uses caution when walking up or down stairs. Lighting on steps should be adequate to avoid shadows (light switches for stairs should be remote, locked in the "on" position, and placed on emergency power). Stairs should have handrails to provide support, and they should be utilized. Handrails should be included in safety/preventive maintenance inspections to ensure that they are secure. It is not advisable to carry a load that blocks one's vision when walking up or down stairs, nor is it advisable to run up or down stairs and skip steps. Never place or leave materials on stairs!

Ladders

Ladders should always be inspected prior to use to ensure that rungs are in good condition and that there are no cracks or broken parts. A task should be evaluated to ensure that the ladder chosen provides the correct height and does not require the employee to reach too far upward or forward, which could result in a fall (always choose the correct ladder for the job). It has been proven that it is easy to lose one's balance while reaching from a ladder. Always attempt to secure the ladder in place and have a second person provide initial assistance until the appropriate work height is reached. Always face front when working from a ladder. If an expandable ladder is used, locks should be secured before the ladder is climbed. Follow the 4 to 1 rule: ladders should be one rung length out from the wall for every four rungs from the ground to where the ladder touches the wall.



Conclusion

The primary causes of slip, trip, and fall events can be eliminated with your assistance:

- Wear the appropriate footwear for your work environment;
- Practice good housekeeping by placing an appropriate cover on liquids that you are carrying and by cleaning up spilled liquids in a timely manner;
- Report slippery areas to the appropriate staff member(s);
- Consider your own physical condition; and
- Be aware of your surroundings and the floor surfaces on which you must walk each day.

These are all proactive actions that you can take to help prevent slips, trips, and falls.

George R. Smith, MA, CHSP, LHRM
AIG Consultants, Inc.
Healthcare Management Division

¹ Cole, Tim. (2003 March/April). What is a safe floor. Facility Care, Volume 8, Number 2, 11.

² Occupational Safety and Health Act, 29 CFR Part 1910.22 (a)(b)



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Publisher

Charles G. Benda, Ph.D., CPCU,
ARM
Senior Vice President
AIG Consultants, Inc.

Editors

George Smith, MA, CHSP, LHRM
Senior Healthcare Consultant
AIG Consultants, Inc.

Catherine Mezzich, MPH
Healthcare Consultant

Associate Editor

Kristina Huff
Business Analyst
AIG Consultants, Inc.

