UNISON HEALTH & SAFETY Information sheet

Slips and Trips

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Slips and trips are often seen as a joke, but they are no laughing matter and occur all too frequently.

A COMMON HAZARD

Slips and trips are responsible for 33% of all major injuries to employees that are reported to the HSE, 20% of over-three-day injuries to employees (that is where they are off work or cannot do their usual job for more than three days), and two fatalities per year. They are also the cause of 50% of all reported accidents to members of the public. Slips and trips are the most common cause of major injuries at work, occurring in most workplaces and causing 9,000 people each year to suffer a serious injury. One slip or trip accident occurs every three minutes. 95% of major slips result in broken bones, and they can also be the initial causes for a range of other accident types. A recent TUC survey, *Preventing Slips and Trips at Work - Falling Down on the Job,* reported that slips and trips were a major problem in 84% of the workplaces surveyed.

In view of all this, the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) has included slips and trips as a *Priority Programme* topic in the Government's *Revitalising Health and Safety Campaign.*

SIGNIFICANT CONSEQUENCES NOT ALWAYS APPRECIATED

Falls from Heights

A recent Health and Safety Executive (HSE) study found that slips and trips also accounted for 30% of falls from heights. With falls from height more likely to lead to serious injury or death, the importance of ensuring that slips and trips do not occur is substantially higher.

Catering

Another high-risk area is within catering where slips and trips cause 75% of all reported serious injuries and 33% of all injuries. Slips account for about 86% of the total slips and trips injuries, and in 90% of cases the floor was wet.

There have been a number of slipping accidents within kitchens where the member of staff has put their arm/s out to steady themselves and placed their hand or arm onto a hot surface or into an open fryer resulting in serious burns (see the case study below). Concern is so high that the HSE is currently reviewing guidance with regard to the guarding of open frying ranges. However, steps must also be taken within kitchens to ensure that the slips do not occur in the first place.

In another incident, a mother of two died when she slipped or tripped on the kitchen floor of the residential care home where she worked. A large knife which she was carrying severed an artery in her neck.

Leisure Sector and Office Environment

But even a slip or trip within an office environment can lead to a far more serious injury or death if, for example, you fall against a corner of a desk or down some steps or stairs. The TUC survey found that most slips and trips occur on stairs or steps (29%), on the shopfloor (28.7%), and outside (26.8%). In the leisure sector, it was found that members of the public were just as likely to have a slip or trip accident as the employees.

Healthcare

Slips and trips account for the main type of accidents to workers and patients in the healthcare sector. In the TUC survey, 44% of the total slips and trips occurred in the health services compared to only 16% in public administration. Whilst the number of slips and trips reported on average for health service workplaces (76) partly reflects the size of hospital workforces, it also suggests a major problem compared with public administration (16-20) where workforces are just as large.

In addition, simple slip and trip injuries such as a broken bone often lead to complications such as thrombosis (blood clots) or embolisms (blood vessels becoming blocked) in older people such as patients, which may be fatal.

UNISON member Alison Hockaday worked in a hospital as an occupational therapy assistant. Her first injury happened in 1986 when she slipped on wet leaves on the entrance steps to the hospital, badly twisting her knee. In 1990 she slipped on a wet vinyl floor in the hospital, fracturing her right ankle. Alison continued to suffer considerable pain and disability in both knee and ankle, requiring numerous operations and eventually leading to a below knee amputation of her right leg. She can only wear her prosthetic limb for a short while indoors and has to use a wheelchair outside. Alison has not worked since 1992, when her employment was terminated on ill-health grounds. She received £600,000 compensation, but can no-longer take part in the sports she used to enjoy regularly.

Education

With structured timetables, large volumes of staff and pupils/students move around at the same time increasing the potential for slip and trip incidents.

In one incident reported to the HSE, an employee slipped on custard in a school canteen just as the clearing away and cleaning operations begun. She broke her leg and died from a blood clot a week later.

A COMBINATION OF FACTORS

Most slips occur in wet or contaminated conditions, and most trips are due to poor housekeeping. The TUC survey found that the four main causes were: 'substances on the floor' (42.9%), 'obstructions' (30.6%), 'adverse weather' (27.8%), and the 'poor state of flooring' (27.6%). However, a combination of factors or a chain of events can lead to a situation where it's just a question of time before an accident occurs.

Case Study

A 16 year old girl slipped on water leaking from an ice-making machine and instinctively put out her hand to break her fall. Her hand and forearm went into a deep fat fryer and she sustained severe burns.

A shortage of staff on the day of the accident meant that rather than monitoring workplace safety, the supervisor was covering someone else's work. Despite a policy to mop up spills it was common practice at busy times just to cover them with cardboard, in itself a trip hazard. The faulty equipment had leaked for several days despite various attempts by different contractors to repair it. No-one had sole responsibility to co-ordinate the repair of equipment and a lack of communication between different shift managers left the equipment leaking over a long period of time.

THE SOLUTION

The solution to preventing slips and trips are often simple and cost effective. A suitable risk assessment should identify:

- the slip and trip hazards (see checklist later);
- those who may be harmed paying particular attention to those more at risk – the young, the elderly, the infirm, those with a disability, pregnant women, or those who may be carrying items and so do not have free hands (plus research shows that by carrying something an individuals gait (how they walk) alters and may make them more liable to slip);
- the risks (likelihood of a slip or trip); and
- then the necessary controls to prevent or minimise (where prevention is not possible) the risk of slipping and tripping.

As with all risk assessments, it should be recorded and reviewed periodically and when there has been any significant change.

Research has established that on average, there will be about 40 cases of a slip or stumble resulting in no or minor injury for every major injury accident which occurs. So staff and visitors need to be encouraged to record all slips and trips no matter how minor, and employers must consider and assess all incidents no matter how small - for they may indicate the risk of a more serious accident in the future.

Steps to prevent or minimise the risk of slips and trips could include:

- preventing the floor from becoming wet or contaminated;
- changing the design of the workplace or the method of work;
- providing adequate lighting;
- avoiding overcrowding;
- providing adequate storage facilities;
- planing pedestrian and traffic routes;
- providing adequate ventilation to avoid the build-up of condensation;
- maintaining equipment and the work environment to prevent leaks, etc;
- using splash guards;
- laying appropriate non-slip flooring – avoiding very smooth floors where wet and contaminated surfaces are inevitable, such as in kitchens and entrances (note that floors can be sufficiently rough to avoid/reduce slipping incidents and still meet food hygiene requirements);
- replacing worn floor coverings - good quality coverings may last longer and thereby be cheaper in the long run;

- using non-slip mats where wet floors are inevitable - whilst ensuring that they don't cause a trip hazard;
- providing staff with suitable non-slip footwear free of charge;
- ensuring that only suitable cleaning materials and methods are used on any slip-resistant floors;
- managing spills effectively and ensuring good cleaning regimes;
- cleaning up spills with a dry method where possible since wet mopping and drying with a mop still leaves a floor wet and slippery;
- where wet floor cleaning is necessary, cleaning the floor outside normal working hours or thoroughly drying it immediately;
- effective housekeeping - is there enough storage space to stop the floor from becoming cluttered, are cables routed safely away from walkways or are cable management systems used;
- maintaining and cleaning outside steps and pathways, etc; and
- training and supervising staff and contractors so that they understand the importance of the preventative measures.

Note that this list is not exhaustive. Can you think of any other appropriate steps that should be taken? Also, have a look at the safety rep inspection checklist at the end of this information sheet.

Case Study

Following the 16 year old girl's accident described above, the employer completely reviewed its management of wet/contaminated floors:

- slip control was given priority over serving customers - employees were empowered by the employer to clean up spills first,
- systems were put in place to ensure prompt repair of faulty equipment,
- managers were identified as being responsible for ensuring that slips procedures were implemented and followed, and
- extra training on slips procedures was given to all staff.

However, this was not before the employer was convicted and fined £15,000 for an accident that was completely avoidable had a suitable and sufficient risk assessment been carried out and a safe system of work been maintained. Alison Hockaday's injuries cost her employer £600,000 in compensation alone.

Within catering, positive management within particular workplaces has led to successful initiatives reducing injuries by over 66%.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The HSE's website has further information on slips and trips at:
http://www.hse.gov.uk/slips/index.htm Alternatively contact HSE Books on 0870 154 5500.

HSE guidance includes:

- *Preventing Slips and Trips at Work* - INDG 225. Single copies are free by post or to download. It is also available in priced packs of 15, ISBN 0717611833.
- *Slips and Trips: Guidance for Employers on Identifying Hazards and Controlling Risks* - HSG 155, ISBN 0717611450, priced £7.50.
- *Preventing Slip and Trip Incidents in the Education Sector* - Education Information Sheet EDIS2, free.
- *Slips and Trips in the Health Services* - Health Services Information Sheet HSIS2, free.

- *Slips and Trips: Summary Guidance for the Catering Industry* - Catering Information Sheet CAIS6, free.

For more information on *Revitalising Health and Safety* go to: http://www.hse.gov.uk/revitalising/

The TUC's survey, *Preventing Slips and Trips at Work - Falling Down on the Job,* is on the web at: http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-6076-f0.cfm A pdf. version can be downlaoded from: http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-6076-f0.pdf

SAFETY REP SLIP AND TRIP HAZARDS INSPECTION CHECKLIST

- Is the floor contaminated (wet or dry e.g. dust, powder, or solid items such as plastic wallets)?
- Are all possible steps taken to avoid contamination - splash guards, lids and covers, leaks promptly repaired, spills immediately cleaned up, etc?
- Are anti-slip mats provided in wet floor areas? Do they present a trip hazard in themselves?
- Is there adequate drainage in wet floor areas, with grilled and not open gulleys and drains?
- Are appropriate protective footwear given free to staff, such as non-slip or with appropriate tread according to the hazard (for outdoor or indoor use with wet floors, snow, ice, or loose ground, etc)?
- Are adequate cleaning procedures in place - for the type of floor, the use it's put to, and the type of any spill (for example, suitable cleaning agents for greasy spills, or non-slip floors, etc)?
- Is wet cleaning avoided/dry cleaning used where possible?
- Where wet cleaning is necessary, does it take place outside of normal working hours, and are warning signs and pedestrian bypass routes used?
- Are doormats provided where moving from wet to dry floor surfaces?
- Are any rugs or mats securely fixed or with non-slip backings, and without curled up edges?
- Are there trailing cables? Can they be re-routed away from pathways, secured, and/or placed inside cable covers?
- Are items stored on the floor/under or near desks, etc?
- Is there adequate storage facilities?
- Is a goods in/out/stock control system required?
- Is overcrowding the problem?
- Are pedistrian routes needed to deal with the volume of people moving at the same time?
- Is rubbish regularly cleared and not allowed to build up?
- Is there adequate lighting?
- Is the floor or floor covering in a good state of repair (no cracks, loose material, holes, tears, or raised or curled up parts)?
- Is the floor level and even (no dips or unexpected slopes)?
- Are changes in the floors level avoided where possible, and where not indicated with high visible tread nosings (i.e. white/reflective strips on the edge of any step) or appropriate markings on slopes?
- Are hand rails provided on slopes, stairs, and steps?
- Are staff given training on the precautions to be taken to avoid slip and trip hazards?
- Are contractors adequately instrucuted and supervised to ensure that they do not create slip and trip hazards?
- Are outside pathways and steps, etc adequatley maintained and cleaned? Are they flat, secure, without potholes, and cleaned of leaves and algae?
- Do outside pathways and steps, etc. have appropriate lighting, markings, and hand rails on steps/slopes, etc.

Note that this list is not exhaustive. Can you think of any other slip or trip hazards in your workplace?