

# Putting Your Best Foot Forward to Prevent Slips, Trips and Falls

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If most of us have been walking for longer than we care to admit, why is that the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other results in so many injuries—both on and off the job? Slips, trips and falls can happen just about anywhere: in the house (especially in the bathroom), on the warehouse floor, in the office, in the lobby where customers pay their bills or out in the field. While some injuries are not serious, others are, such as broken bones, back injuries and head trauma. In some cases, injuries may even result in death.

But there is good news: preventing slips, trips and falls is not that hard. Practicing these three simple steps can minimize the chances of an injury: 1) be aware of your surroundings, 2) practice good housekeeping and 3) use equipment properly. The majority of slip, trip and fall injuries can be avoided at home and at work.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports that slips, trips and falls cause 15% of all accidents and are second only to vehicle accidents in causing fatalities. The National Safety Council reports that one in four visitors to the emergency room is there because of a fall. It is estimated that 75% of all slips, trips and falls occur on walking surfaces like floors, stairs and sidewalks. Generally, it is the falls from heights that cause very serious injuries or death. In reality, sometimes a slip will cause a trip that will in turn cause a fall.

A **slip** happens when there isn't enough friction or traction between your feet and the surface you are walking on. Ice, oil, cleaning fluids and other slippery substances are the most common causes of slips. It's a good idea to always clean up spills promptly and then put up a sign to re-route foot traffic if an area is wet. If you have to walk across a wet surface, shorten your stride to keep the center of balance under you, walk with your feet pointed slightly outward, make wide turns and wear slip-resistant footwear, if it is a regular occurrence.

A **trip** happens when your foot contacts an object causing you to lose your balance. The most common causes of trips are clutter, uncovered electrical cords/cables, wrinkled or holey carpet or rugs, uneven floor or pavement in the sidewalk or parking lot, poor lighting, open drawers/files in an office and obstacles around corners. Remember, if you own and/or maintain property such as a parking lot, you could be responsible if an employee, a customer or a vendor trips and is injured. Inspecting your property, maintaining proper lighting and practicing good housekeeping will prevent many trips from occurring.



A **fall** occurs when you lose your balance and your footing. You may be thrown off balance by a slip or a trip, but once you lose your footing and support, a fall is inevitable. Unsafe practices like standing on the bumper to clean the vehicle windshield, failure to use safety cages, or jumping on and off lift gates opens an invitation for a fall. However, the most common cause of a fall at the worksite is the unsafe use of ladders—using ladders incorrectly or using the wrong ladder for a specific kind of job. Some common industry standards for using a ladder include:

- Use the four to one rule; set the base of the ladder one foot away from the wall for every four feet of ladder height.
- Face the ladder when climbing up or down.
- Never use the top two rungs of a step-ladder. ►►►

- Do not paint or tape a ladder since it could hide cracks.
- If accessing a roof, the ladder should extend three feet above where it touches the structure.
- Always wear appropriate shoes and place your foot solidly on each rung.

The winter months are especially haz-

ardous when it comes to slips, trips and falls due to the presence of snow and ice. Specific risk management tips for the winter months include: use grille-type flooring so that snow falls through; shovel snow promptly; follow the manufacturer's recommendations for compounds to melt away snow and ice; and use door mats or

rubber runners at doorways to help prevent snow and ice from creating a slippery hazard on interior floors. Individuals should wear all-weather shoes to work and change into work shoes inside the building, wear sunglasses when outside to help see surfaces more clearly, and be extra careful when getting out of a vehicle by holding on to the doors and handles inside and exiting slowly. Don't let old man winter trip you up.

There are things you can do year round to reduce the risks of slipping, tripping and falling anytime. It's been described as defensive walking, which is very similar to defensive driving. It's not always about what you are doing, but what others are doing and what's happening around you. The basis tenants are:

- If you drop something, pick it up.
- If you spill something, clean it up.
- Walk, don't run.
- Scan ahead of you for potential hazards; make sure your pathway is clear.
- Wear proper footwear. Some experts predict that half of all slips, trips and falls could be prevented with proper footwear, especially for those employees who work outside (OSHA has specific requirements depending on the type of job).
- Limit the load you are carrying so that your view isn't obstructed.
- Maintain three points of contact on stairs or ramps by using a handrail.
- Watch guests or customers to give them any assistance they might need.
- Exercise regularly to maintain strength, flexibility and balance.

No business is free from all the hazards of slips, trips or falls. However, with a little extra care, a little money for correction materials and prompt attention to unsafe conditions, these hazards may be among the easiest to correct and prevent. Yes, you may have insurance to protect your employees and your business from third-party claims, but there are all kinds of costs associated with accidents and injuries. Teach and practice safe walking. Don't let a slip, trip or fall prevent you or your employees from enjoying life. ■

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