

Managing the Risks from Slips and Trips

Talk to any liability underwriter and they will confirm that slips and trips are the main cause of so called attritional claims impacting technical profitability.

Despite this fact, many employers fail to effectively manage the risks from slips, trips and falls in the workplace and most insurers and brokers fail to help or encourage policyholders to get this under control.

In this article Mark Preston, Head of Safety Consultancy at Cardinus looks at the main issues that need to be addressed.

According to the latest Health and Safety Executive (HSE) statistics (for 20010-11) there were 11,957 slips and trips reported under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR), resulting in major injury, accounting for 40% of all reported major injuries. Slips and trips accounted for a further 23,174 'over 3 day accidents' reported representing 23% of the total. Around 90% of the 'over 3 day accidents' reports resulted from broken bones and just under 9,000 of these resulted in absence from work of between 1 & 3 months.

This equates to about 2 million lost working days so everyone should be interested in this!

Getting the Basics Right

To be effective in this area, policyholders need to ensure that that they have input and buy in from staff. It is vital to get the culture right and encourage staff to take positive action when they identify a risk. When you get a 'See it; sort it' culture it becomes the order of the day, with each employee looking after their own well being and the welfare of their colleagues.

Whilst it is vital to have clearly written and communicated policies and procedures, adopting the policy at managerial level maybe easy but it will remain ineffective unless a communication plan is executed to all staff. Managers must positively support action taken to prevent accidents. Slips and trips are not generally the fault of the person that falls. Most accidents of this nature result from the presence of some form of hazard, such as a trailing lead, a spilled liquid or simply a polished floor. It is therefore essential that the policyholder understand the basics of accident prevention.

Basics of Accident Prevention

Being proactive about accident prevention means positively seeking out those elements that may lead to a slip or fall.

Clients need to consider unsafe acts and unsafe conditions. The unsafe condition may be a slippery floor; however, no accident will occur until someone walks across it, the unsafe act. By preventing these two factors from

co-existing in the same place at the same time, it is possible to reduce or prevent slips and trips.

Promoting the Culture

Staff with a 'see it; sort it' culture will take the time to resolve problems. Looking for culprits is not an effective solution. In the first instance, the aim should be to render the area safe. That means dealing with the unsafe condition, i.e. cleaning up a spill, or preventing the unsafe act, i.e. fencing off the area until it can be cleaned. The focus should be on prevention rather than blame. It is a pointless exercise ticking off an individual for spilling oil when the root cause is the poor design of the filling.

Know the Size of the Problem

Careful examination of the workplace and a study of slip and trip accident trends (whether resulting in a claim or not) is the best way to identify what needs to be done. Hazards may exist at different times of the day or during specific operations such as tool setting or maintenance. Plotting the incidence of slips and trips on a site plan can be a very useful indicator of problems. Often, this will highlight problem areas. The resources needed to devote to the risks are dependent on the size and nature of the undertaking. In each case, the response should be focused on prevention.

There is More to it than Risk Assessment

While a risk assessment might form the basis of your management action plan it will need to be supported with positive and proactive leadership. Does the senior management team really understand the risk profile?

Focus on risk rather than compliance. Risk assessments do not prevent accidents. Competent managers, strong leadership, employee involvement and good communication are the key to recognising and dealing with potential dangers. If you ever hear the words, "there is a trailing lead someone can trip over" then there is a problem. The words managers should be hearing are "I have cleared away the trailing lead from...". Reporting issues is good, dealing with issues is better. Managers need to constantly reinforce the 'see it; sort it' message.

What to Look Out For?

History and research have shown that the majority of slips and trips result from 7 key areas for control. Plans need to take these issues into account.

- **Flooring**

Staff should be able to move freely around their work areas, without the threat of a slip or trip, even where a floor cannot be kept dry.

- **Contamination**

Aim to prevent contamination through design. Where this is not possible measures need to be in place to limit or control the degree of contamination that can occur.

- **Poor Housekeeping**

Poor housekeeping causes about 50% of slips and trips. Establish the areas where individuals are required to work. These should be kept clear of obstruction and maintained. Managers and staff need to co-operate to ensure the whole of the work areas are kept free of potential hazards.

- **Cleaning**

Cleaning regimes can impart their own hazards and risks on a work area. They should be subject to their own risk assessment, which accounts for the slip and trip risks. It is important to consider:

- Use of the correct products.
- Whether the equipment is properly maintained.
- The correct regime for each surface.
- Water contamination – wet floors.
- Spot cleaning.
- Warning signs.
- Timing of cleaning to coincide with low pedestrian activity.

- **People**

Human behaviour is a significant factor. Employees should be encouraged to wear sensible footwear. If safety footwear is necessary then it must be provided free-of-charge.

Avoid activities which cause distractions and consider issues which affect lines of sight or other senses.

Individuals should be proactively encouraged not to rush about or involve themselves in horseplay. Consider disabilities or physical attributes that may affect individuals and whether special provisions maybe required.

- **Environmental Conditions**

Where possible, policyholders need to manage the risks from snow, ice or water ingress on a smooth floor. Lighting is equally important and needs to be balanced to define the risks without producing glare or hazardous reflections.

Noise can cause distractions and the use of hearing protection dulls the senses.

- **Footwear**

Correct footwear is essential dependent on the risks involved. For areas of special risk, i.e. a food preparation room with a smooth floor, specialist footwear may be necessary with a non-slip sole.