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Slips and falls*

**ALL REASONABLE MEASURES**  
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*To have any hope of success, a slip-and-fall protection program has to cover all the bases – and keep them covered all the time*

In Canada, there are more than 36,000 workers injured from slip, trips and falls annually. The cost of these accidents averages \$20,000 per incident, which translates to \$720 million annually. The sad fact is that a right percentage of these accidents are preventable and if the right effort is expended by workers and employers. Clearly, it is in our interest to give this problem a hard look and develop programs that will finally make headway in reducing this ridiculously high expense – not to mention the associated pain and suffering.

It is important to understand that the many problems associated with slips and falls are complicated by the effects of such things as the weather, lighting, maintenance practices, cleaning systems, the footwear used, visual distractions, and the personalities and attitudes of people in the workplace. With the numerous different flooring materials available, combined with the unlimited variety of contaminants, we have a constantly shifting playing field with which to work and try to generate solutions to the slip-and-fall problem.

The reality is that you are not going to eliminate the risk of slips and falls, only reduce it. The way to get a handle on this problem is to constantly evaluate where and why there is a problem and what is required to make appropriate adjustments.

- Thorough accident investigations of all accidents and near misses should be conducted.
- A detailed database of slip and fall accidents or near misses should be maintained to help pinpoint problem areas and take steps to solve them.
- Any suspect floor surface should be tested to determine the coefficient of friction. Records these results in a safety log for future reference.
- A system of progressive discipline should be used when workers, supervisors, and managers deliberately ignore safety rules and regulatory requirements.
- The route workers and visitors take from parking lot to your entrance should not be ignored, even if it is not part of the employer's property. There are circumstances in which you may be found responsible for slips and falls that occur there.
- Each department should conduct and document regular walk-through slip, trip and fall inspections.

One thing is certain, companies are slowly becoming aware of the problem of slip and fall accidents. At the recent International Sanitation Supply Association (ISSA) show in Las Vegas, it seemed that every fifth booth had a product to offer that reduced slips and falls. As well, many recognizable companies are offering products that reduce slips and falls by increasing the coefficient of friction on different flooring materials, and in some cases, new flooring materials are advertised as having complied with existing legislation on floor safety.

Two words are critical when considering an employer's responsibility for ensuring workers safety: due diligence. Floor safety is simply one of the many responsibilities a manager or supervisor has. It is critical that the OH&S program be ongoing, with controls for specific hazards in the workplace, along with detailed back-up documentation to prove implementation and proper functioning of the system.

By far the single greatest weapon to reduce the likelihood of slip and fall accidents is a maintenance program. If a simple but effective maintenance program were adopted and continually monitored, most facilities would realize a dramatic reduction in slips and falls. It has been my experience that the lowest paid and often least trained employee is expected to mop the floor. In many cases the dirt or grease is merely transferred from one part of the operation to another, which just moves the problem around. Something as simple as using hot, clean water, with a proper amount of floor cleaning detergent, a scrub brush and a wet/dry vacuum cleaner will get the floor cleaned properly. The simple act of cleaning up a spill during the work day will have immeasurable benefits.

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Other than completely changing the flooring material, there are only two practical solutions to reduce slip and fall hazards: better footwear or better floor surfaces to improve the coefficient of friction.

There are shoes that give better grip in wet conditions because they have a special compound of hard grit on the sole to give a sandpaper-like finish and produce a good anti-slip surface.

There are many companies that will offer treatments to the floor surface, including the following:

- Etching (**NEV-R-SLIP**) a hard mineral floor gives it a slightly rougher texture that will work well in wet conditions, but could fill with contaminants that reduce the anti-slip effect.
- Crystallizing the silica (**AST 95**) in hard mineral flooring materials is superior to etching, will generally last twice as long and will not degrade the surface structure.
- **Safety grooving** is an excellent alteration to existing hard mineral floors where there is a grease, oil or food hazard. **Safety grooving** consists of cutting multiple concentric circles into the hard floor with a specialized drill & diamond bits to produce a great anti-slip effect in all conditions. The grooves cut into the floor are very shallow (credit card thickness), making maintenance easy, and the visual effect shows that something has been done to improve safety.
- Coating products are available, including anti-slip waxes, epoxies and urethanes with a slip resistant aggregate mixed in for sheet or resilient floors.
- Anti-slip mats, textile, vinyl or rubber are available from many manufacturers. There is a wide selection that will deal with specific problem areas and will generally prove very effective. Be cautious of mat thickness in order to avoid creating a tripping hazard, and make sure that mats are large enough for the required area. Entrance mats collect dirt & moisture as intended. They require daily maintenance and will become less effective with long-term wear and tear.
- Anti-slip tapes are a good stand-by that will prove effective if used and installed correctly.

Good housekeeping is critical for the prevention of falls due to slips and trips. It's important to understand that housekeeping order is maintained, not achieved. Without it, all other preventive measures such as installing sophisticated flooring using specialty footwear or treating floors are never fully effective. Integrating a good housekeeping program identifies and assigns responsibilities.

Most important, the workers and supervisors have to be trained to understand and follow all the safety rules and procedures in the workplace. Simply handing out written safety rules or posting a policy is not sufficient to establish due diligence; it must be shown that the employer provided adequate instruction, training, supervision and discipline.

You would think that managers and owners would become more proactive in the war to eliminate costly slip & fall lawsuits, but I constantly witness evidence to the contrary. Russian roulette is very often played with workers and guests' safety. Remember, slip and fall prevention is everyone's responsibility. An effective system of supervision is a key part of maintaining the system. Never assume that a person will be aware of a hazard because "it's common sense". You must bring every risk, even if it seems obvious, to everyone's attention.

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT SLIPS AND FALLS

Anyone can slip and fall anytime, anywhere, no matter what precautions are taken. This does not mean that it's hopeless to try to prevent these accidents. Instead, it means that you have to do everything reasonably possible, and have policies and procedures in place to make sure that all those things are constantly maintained.

- It should be a constantly enforced policy that all slip and fall hazards must be reported and dealt with immediately.
- If a hazard can't be dealt with immediately, pedestrian traffic must be routed around the hazard, and warning signs should be posted.
- Workers maintaining the floor must be adequately trained.
- Cleaning compounds must be properly diluted and mixed according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- Traction-enhancing floor treatments can be used in high-risk areas.
- Absorbent material should be available to deal with spills.
- Floors should be kept as dry as possible, free from water, food, grease, snow, ice, oil or any other contaminant.
- Dust should also be cleaned up promptly, since it can present a slip and fall hazard.
- Good lighting is critical to help people avoid a potential slip or trip.
- Differences of floor elevation in aisles and corridors should be clearly marked.
- Walkways should be kept clear of obstructions
- Floor mats should be securely on the floor and maintained in good order; torn or damaged mats should be removed or repaired immediately.
- Mats must be of sufficient size to deal with the problem area.
- Linoleum and other polished floor surfaces should be treated with a non-slip preparation.
- Stairways should be equipped with anti-slip treads and suitable handrails.
- Slip resistant footwear can be used to further reduce the risk of slips and falls.

