

rmp

Risk control
Slips, Trips and Falls
Toolkit: Human Factors



In partnership with



Slips, Trips and Falls Toolkit: Human Factors

Introduction

Falls are the most common cause of major injury in the workplace and a significant contributory factor to these injuries are the actions of people. Of all the reportable injuries received annually by the Health and Safety Executive, 32% related to slips, trips and falls on the level¹.

The person who has fallen often feels embarrassed and they can be quick to assume that it was their own fault. However, even though human error is likely to have been a factor, it is rarely the sole cause.

Every employer has to address the foreseeable risks, and so should be considering the contribution of human factors² when performing risk assessments and implementing risk control measures.

It is important that people have a safe environment and positive safety culture to work in and are provided with the training, equipment and time required to undertake their work in a safe manner.

Causation

We learn to walk at an early age and quickly learn to identify and react to hazards, as well as subconscious reactions to maintain our balance. We only tend to fall if external factors (e.g. slippery floor) overwhelm our abilities to react or if our early warning systems are not able to work effectively due to fatigue, distractions or poor visibility of hazards.

Some people's early warning systems and reactions are better than others and they can change for a variety of reasons e.g. medical conditions, age, alcohol and drugs. Try to provide a workplace and safety culture in which workers can work effectively and where their ability to react is not overly challenged.

At the start of a day a person makes assumptions about the environments they will be visiting and the choice of footwear that would be suitable. Errors of judgement at this stage can have significant consequences later in the day.

Spillages

When a liquid spills onto a floor surface the potential for slips and falls can significantly increase. Therefore, a robust cleaning regime can have a big influence on the slip risk in an organisation. The safe system of work used by cleaners to ensure the floor surface is cleaned and returned to use in a safe manner is essential.

The whole procedure needs to be explained to the cleaners so that they are not tempted to improvise a quicker way to clean but overlook safety measures that they did not appreciate were important.

As a general principle, training on the system of work needs to cover 'why' and 'how' to be effective and tasks should have realistic timescales to avoid the temptation of rushing.

Passers-by also must be taken into consideration as they may not pay close attention to warning signs. When planning cleaning activity take account of this type of behaviour and consider more robust physical barriers preventing access during cleaning.

Visibility and Visual Impairment

Our ability to see slip and trip hazards is vitally important to avoid falls, therefore workplaces should be suitably lit. In some situations trip hazards cannot be removed, such as changes in level or bunding around machinery, they should be highlighted using visual contrast. Stair nosings in particular need to be a contrasting colour or shade so that when walking down stairs the edge of the stair can be recognised.

It is also essential to consider the needs of the visually impaired³. Modifications that may be needed include:

- Keeping floors clear of clutter and being review the placement of low-to-the-ground furniture
- Rapidly detecting and cleaning any spills or mess immediately to avoid injury
- Avoiding or replacing flooring that is slippery or produces glare (floors with a glossy or shiny finish)
- Hanging picture frames or paintings *above* hand level, as to not interfere with a visually impaired person needs to use walls to feel their way around the building
- Making sure the rugs are placed securely and are a contrasting colour from the floor. Also, consider keeping any bathmats draped over the tub or put away except at bath/shower time
- Taping down edges of area rugs to help prevent trips and falls

Distraction

In our modern world it is possible for a person to be walking in the building and become distracted. The distractions can include their mobile phone or tablet, reading documents while walking, talking to other people, or carrying more than they can handle safely.

Encourage employees to challenge co-workers who are distracted and help each other stay focussed. Showing concern can be a very effective, simple and non-expensive safety measure.

Rushing

It is natural for people to want to get a job done as quickly as possible, so that the next task can be started sooner. In a busy workplace it may seem important to get as much done as we can, however rushing to get the job done can mean causing an injury to yourself or others.

Rushing can lead to skill-based errors where a step is missed out in a task, or a mistake is made when a task is not carried out correctly. This could result in the cleaning of floors not being completed thoroughly, warning signage not displayed to alert people of a hazard, or a person not following local rules such as not using mobile phones while using stairs.

Ultimately these errors or mistakes could cause harm to a person, or others affected by the way they are carrying out their work. Encourage people not to rush and pay attention to their surroundings.

Fatigue

When we expect a person to work excessive working time or poorly designed shift patterns, the outcome can be fatigue⁴. It can cause a decline in mental and/or physical performance caused by prolonged exertion, sleep loss and/or disruption of their internal clock. Tasks that are complex or monotonous can lead to the worker becoming fatigued. This can cause slower reactions; reduced ability to process information; memory lapses when carrying out tasks; absent-mindedness; a decreased awareness of their surroundings; a lack of attention to visual cues; an underestimation of the level of risk they are facing, and reduced coordination.

Have a policy that specifically addresses and sets limits on working hours, overtime and shift-swapping, and which guards against fatigue is important. It is also necessary to consider that in an environment with shift working and night shifts the level of general and task lighting will need to be increased.

Complacency

In the workplace a person may ignore warning signs because they do not perceive there to be a risk, they are confident in their ability to deal with the consequences if it happens, and the organisation appears to be tolerant of the risk because of complacency⁵.

The use of toolbox talks highlighting the situations where slips and trips can occur and the real consequences can help to improve the perception of risk. Regular feedback on the impact on a person, and their colleagues, following a slip or trip accident can make the consequences more real.

Supervisors and Managers can play an active part in demonstrating the organisation's low tolerance for slip trip and fall risks.

Summary

Any prudent and responsible organisation will regularly review their policies and practices to make sure that they are doing everything they can to ensure the health and safety of those affected by their undertaking.

References

1. Non-fatal injuries at work in Great Britain. Available here: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causinj/index.htm>
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4. Why is fatigue important? Available here: <https://www.icheme.org/media/9027/xxiii-paper-18.pdf>
5. Complacency as a causal factor in accidents – fact or fallacy? Available here: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/fatigue.htm>

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Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

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